

Chapter 3: Disaster >> Attack on the Turkana District Space Elevator - ???

Part 1

"I'll kill her!!"

"Stop, Heivia. That wouldn't accomplish anything. We were the ones who destroyed the World's End and we can't threaten her into ordering its dead hulk back into orbit regardless! Myonri, restrain this idiot!!"

"Why do I always get stuck with the worst jobs!?" complained Myonri.

At any rate, they had no time.

All the cameras on the exterior of the space station had been destroyed, but when they pressed up against the double-layer reinforced glass windows, they could see an orange glow.

"The Elinabell is a hunk of metal weighing 200 thousand tons."

Louisiana Honeysuckle smiled thinly in the heart of the elevator that was larger than a domed stadium.

Quenser clenched his teeth at having to stand up for her, but the genius scientist behind the Federation of Elevator Industries did not stop speaking.

"Do you know how small the 'meteors' from the artificial meteor shower are? Those rival a small nuclear warhead in power, but this is much larger. Can you even calculate the scope of the damage?"

The World's End was a space Object.

Its altitude was already a good bit less than this space station. It was slowly falling toward the blue planet.

It supposedly no longer functioned, but was that orange light really only due to its fall? That sinister glow seemed to carry a much more horrific destructive power.

If that 200,000-ton mass continued to fall without any real deceleration, the entire world would be exposed to a fearsome impact and tremor. Even if some of the human race survived, they would be faced with an endless ice age thanks to all the dust filling the air.

Quenser could not believe it. Or maybe it was his common sense tapping the brakes here that

prevented him from being a true genius. Those were the thoughts going through his mind as he faced this incomprehensible monster.

“Do you...?”

The Re Terraforming was meant to unify the world’s environment by spreading more soil and water from the space elevator than could be removed, but that had failed.

So what was this?

Was this meant as a Plan B???

“Do you really think this will make things equal? Triggering an ice age will only mean the death of all life on earth. There are no opportunities there for the Turkana District or anywhere else!!”

He had unwittingly pulled the trigger for the world’s destruction.

He had erred in his final move.

He should have kept going until it had been vaporized.

Louisiana Honeysuckle grinned as she raised both hands.

That demon whispered as her lab coat spread out like wings in zero-g.

“Now, here’s a question for you: what are you going to do about this?”

“Dammit!!”

Quenser began speaking over his radio.

The jamming was gone now that they had taken the elevator.

“Frolaytia! Princess!! This is an emergency! The space Object is falling toward the surface. It seems to be near the elevator, so can you intercept it with the Baby Magnum’s main cannons!?”

“Bff!?”

Their silver-haired busty commander spat out her drink all the way back down on the supposedly

safe surface.

The Princess remained calmer.

“If it is no more than a mass of metal, then no. Is the reactor still running? If it has an explosive inside, I could aim for that to break it apart in midair.”

Louisiana gave a snort of laughter.

“What logical reason would the Elinabell have to continue running that dangerous reactor now that it’s too damaged to move?”

“Goddamn you,” groaned Quenser.

But even if he was a student, he could not just place all the responsibility on the surface team. They had pulled the trigger up here and ignorance was no excuse.

That planet was his home.

Coming out of all these wars as an Object designer and earning an obscene fortune would be meaningless if he had no home to return to.

This was not about anything as silly as “doing the right thing”.

He was fighting to ensure his own desires could come true.

“Understood. Princess, you work to intercept it from the surface. Its JPlevelMHD reactor isn’t running, but it is a Second Generation that uses highly concentrated oxygen. It has plenty of other explosives contained inside, so you might just be able to trigger an internal explosion!!”

“And if I can’t?”

“We can’t just sit idly by up here. We’ll be heading there too.”

He cut off his helmet’s radio and gestured Louisiana over.

“C’mere!! You need earth to survive as much as the rest of us and you’re the asshole that built that thing, so you’re fighting against our mutual destruction too.”

“Oh? I seem to recall this destruction was caused by someone else here.”

“Shut up.”

He grabbed her slender hand and pulled her along.

He had no time for her meaningless prattle. Every minute and second counted. She might not have a gun or a knife, but wasting their time was the ultimate weapon for her.

Heivia suddenly panicked.

“Hey, where are you going!? And what do you hope to do!?”

“Did you forget where we were, Heivia? This is the Mother Lady space elevator. It’s a next-generation platform connecting space to the surface.”

“Wait, are you serious?”

“We’ll use their own elevator to catch up to the falling Object. Then we can get a look at it. We can’t prevent it from entering the atmosphere at this point, but this isn’t over yet. If we can cause it to break up in midair, we can avoid the worst-case scenario!!”

“So we just managed to pull out before blowing our load and now you’re telling us to take that smelly goo to the face!? You have got to be kidding me!!”

The space elevator could travel the 36,000km distance at about 200km/h. That made for an enjoyable space trip of about a week one way. But if they destroyed the safety equipment and let gravity take control, they could descend much more quickly. If they were wearing their pressurized space suits, they would not have to worry about barotrauma from the rapid pressure change.

Quenser pulled a Capitalist Corporations spacesuit out of a box. The elevator defense unit they had fought had only been powered suits and armored vehicles, so this was his first time seeing one of their spacesuits. It was quite slim compared to the puffy Legitimacy Kingdom ones. It was mostly black with yellow accents here and there. It was probably made from tech developed for a Pilot Elite’s special suit.

(Why would you color a spacesuit black? Are they even trying to survive?)

Quenser was speechless, but then he remembered this was the girl who wore red sports bloomers and a lab coat while in space. She saw the world differently from normal people.

At any rate, he pushed the spacesuit toward Louisiana.

"I doubt you want to become a pawn of the Legitimacy Kingdom, but you'll be riding the elevator too. Help us customize the car. Make any intentional mistakes and you'll burn up in the thermosphere along with us."

"You're a surprisingly trusting boy. Or do kids these days have no imagination now that they can look everything up on their phones? What if I decided to ensure my plan succeeded through suicide?"

"Can I just shoot her? Like right now!?"

"Heivia." He stopped his awful friend with a quick word. "If you really wanted to kill yourself, you wouldn't have put your hands up. If you had aimed a self-defense handgun at us, you would've died then and there. But you didn't."

"..."

"You want to see this through to the end, no matter how it ends, don't you?"

"What solid proof of this do you have?"

"You're a skilled weapons developer," spat out Quenser. "Any Object designer would want to know what becomes of their creation."

The 17-year-old genius girl smiled, but this was not meant as a provocation like before.

"Fine, but I will remind you it is already too late to accomplish anything."

"Whether or not our world gets through this unsafe day is up to our efforts. It isn't for you to say while you keep thrusting your hips for your own satisfaction."

With that, Quenser and Louisiana walked to the carbon nanotube wires lined up in parallel at the center of the space station. They were interested in the bus-sized cylindrical "elevator car" attached to those.

Once they stepped inside the thick personnel-entrance door, Louisiana did something truly unexpected.

The genius immediately reached for her clothes and stripped them off with no hesitation whatsoever. Her lab coat, her gym clothes, and even her underwear floated around her in zero-g.

"Wait, what the hell are you doing!?"

"We have no idea what is about to happen, so at least give me the right to change into my spacesuit as soon as possible, boy."

"B-b-b-but you...and I...!?"

"Yes, yes, I can tell we will never see eye to eye. Here, maybe this will shut up you. In this hand, I have the panties. In this hand, the bloomers. Now, eat up."

Quenser's mind shorted out as the annoyed genius girl shoved some faintly warm and balled up fabric into his mouth.

It did not seem to bother her at all.

In this enclosed space, Quenser discovered an answer to exactly how a pair of breasts would behave in zero-g. Yes, without their original weight and without the support of any underwear, the boobs floated softly in the air!!

Meanwhile...

"Ahh, I felt so naked without this on."

"Bwah!!"

She was not talking about the underwear Quenser spat out.

Now that she was wearing a black special suit that showed off her figure even more than the gym clothes, she half-jokingly made sure to put back on the lab coat floating nearby. Instead of a spherical helmet on her head, she wore something like an old-fashioned gasmask with two round octopus-like eyepieces. That made her look somewhat like an extremely niche sort of bondage girl. She may have thought this protected her entire body, but it was troubling for Quenser. Specifically, he could not afford to look down at her crotch. The Y-shape there was very Y-shaped.

Louisiana turned the two round eyepieces toward him.

"Now I have my safety, so how about we get down to business?"

The number of Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had been reduced by a lot.

Louisiana spoke up so casually she might as well have been talking about cooking something.

"Accelerating in space is simple enough, so the problem here is actually earth and all its air. If you

want to pick up speed in freefall, your only option is to destroy all the brakes, leaving the car entirely uncontrollable. Which will of course make the ride much less safe.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“We also need to apply new coolant to the surface of contact with the wire. Otherwise, we could burn through the carbon nanotube wires with friction.”

“Just friction could break wires sturdy enough to survive constant contact with the thermosphere?”

“Really? Just friction? You really do need to work on your imagination, boy. We’re talking about a drop of 36,000km. Do you have any idea how much force that will build up?”

“...”

“A constant high or low temperature is not an issue. An irregular jump in either direction is the real threat to the wires. That’s why we used so much water from the surface to smooth that out.”

So they were talking about literally astronomical numbers. Even the ordinary natural phenomena seen in everyday life could cause seemingly supernatural phenomena if the quantities were great enough. He would have to imagine things at a scale different even from Object design.

His only option was to trust the instincts of the expert.

Even if she was also the cause of all these problems in the first place.

“Why did you do this?” he asked.

“To save the world.”

“?”

“Did you think that was only a distraction? But here I am, still fighting. Although honestly, the world and the human race are only bonus prizes. I only wanted to bring happiness to the people trying to protect their simple lives and the incredible nature of the Turkana District. Saving the world is just what it’s going to take to save them.”

“Using the space elevator for Re Terra will only shorten the entire world’s lifespan. And creating an ice age to force a uniform global environment will be even worse.”

“This is nothing so hackneyed.”

He could not read her.

And not just because her gasmask-like helmet kept him from seeing her face. He was missing some fundamental piece needed to understand her.

Was this the difference between a superior genius and an average person? Staring into her eyes was like staring at a Halloween jack-o'-lantern. Was she lying or telling the truth? Was she joking or serious? He could not tell. Could Braskine have figured it out?

"This is just like finding yanderes to be sexy," said Heivia from outside the door. "Take her seriously and you're the one who ends up looking like a fool."

He seemed irritated by how incomprehensible Louisiana was, but Quenser did not take such a simplified approach. As a battlefield student, he was far too inexperienced to call a pro, but even he could tell that Louisiana's work was perfect. She was not broken. Her mind had to be working perfectly, just at a higher level.

There was something here he was missing.

Something that had yet to show itself after all this. Something felt terribly off and he rolled that feeling around inside him.

He gulped within his helmet before asking a question.

"What is it you see?"

"What do you think I see? The world of science is equal to all. Nuclear reactions were occurring everywhere even before $e=mc^2$ was proposed. The sunshine is the most obvious example, but there is also the legend of an ancient city being utterly annihilated by a mysterious light after being hit by the divine superweapon known as the god Agni's arrow and that the victims suffered for an extended period of time while their hair and nails fell out. ...You have already seen the answer, but you have failed to consciously recognize it."

"..."

"All done. We can begin."

She closed a metal clasp and then shut the small door.

The black and yellow gloves were slim enough to show off the beauty of her slender fingers. The puffy Legitimacy Kingdom spacesuits could never produce a silhouette like that.

“It seems the Legitimacy Kingdom has taken over the Turkana District ground base, but communicating with them would not be enough. Moving the elevator car up or down requires leaving a certain level of personnel in the space station too. But if you don’t maintain some control up here in space, the brave survivors of the station crew might just stage a counterattack.”

The clever potatoes who had survived this long exchanged a glance.

The answer here was obvious.

“I’m not going if I don’t have to, so whoever loses this game have to go!! Rock, paper, scissors!!!!!!”

Quenser and Heivia stared silently down at their hands after their scissors were instantly defeated.

Louisiana Honeysuckle had to take the elevator down regardless, so only she kept grinning throughout. Her octopus-like mask hid her face, but Quenser could still tell. She turned to face him with her figure revealed by her spacesuit.

“You were the one who told me to see this through to the end,” she said. “So let us take this journey together. Let us descend ever closer to the doomed world below on this journey to hell. But what is it you will discover at the end of that journey, my modern Dante?”

Part 2

A deafening sound similar to thick metal being scraped away continued endlessly around them.

“H-h-h-”

Pale faced, Myonri grabbed at the seatbelt strapping her in. She of course had her helmet’s thick visor lowered even inside the perfectly airtight elevator car.

“How far are we dropping!?! It hasn’t malfunctioned, has it!?”

“We will be dropping a long way. The thermosphere alone is about 400km from top to bottom. Unlike the carpet bombing of the artificial meteor shower, a simple freefall will take some time to crash into the surface from orbit. The meteors can apparently reach speeds above Mach 5, but the Object’s size means more resistance. I imagine it will decelerate a lot once it enters the thermosphere. But if you do want to start the fighting here, I won’t stop you. If you insist on opening the incinerator’s lid, simply reach for that door.”

Was she simply accustomed to being in space?

Louisiana remained calm even while captured and plummeting toward the earth.

The two round eyepieces on her gasmask-like helmet were a problem. Quenser knew they were fake, but it still felt like having two giant eyeballs glaring at him.

“Also, the shaking is not due to a mechanical malfunction. It is due to the drop in speed needed for reentry and the periodic shaking of the wires themselves. The elevator might be a massive structure with a total length of 100,000km, but it is still bound by the laws of physics. Calmly keep count and you should find that it follows a set pattern and is not some irregular trouble.”

No one in the Legitimacy Kingdom could say for sure how much stress was being placed on the elevator car. They could only tremble and pray for their survival. As long as they made this one descent successfully, it did not matter if the rollers contacting the wire were worn down or if the axle was heated to a bright red.

Only one person held all the knowledge here.

That was Louisiana Honeysuckle, the cause of all this.

And that was why the genius scientist remained calm even now. Surrounded by the soldiers in puffy spacesuits, she crossed her legs in her black skintight special suit and looked out through the thick window.

“There she is.”

“...”

“My adorable Elinabell. I wonder if the Elite within is enjoying a small glass of poison to say goodbye to it all. As elegant as that might look, it is not a pleasant way to die. But she was still willing to give up her life to save the world.”

The sky was a deep navy blue. They were clearly too high up for clouds, but the single color made it look like a navy blue greenscreen or like god had gotten lazy. And a giant orange ball of fire was visible through the half-frozen window. That was all that remained of the World’s End. The manmade shooting star looked so large and sinister up close. It was followed by a glowing tail for a different reason than a comet.

They were just about to pass it by.

Heivia removed the multipurpose scope from his assault rifle, switched the mode, and looked through it.

“An estimated surface temperature of over 2000 degrees,” he groaned. “What do we do about that? Just getting close will turn us into human torches. We don’t even have to touch it.”

“The solid wall of the sonic boom would tear you to pieces before even that. It should be entirely surrounded by something like a giant robot’s forcefield. That will have a teardrop shape it starts round at the front but narrows down as it continues on back.”

Louisiana seemed to be enjoying herself.

But that was going to be her problem too soon enough. The elevator was rapidly dropping and was passing the falling Object as they spoke. So instead of looking down on it, they would be looking up at it. If it crashed into the surface, she too would be obliterated.

They could see it, but there was still nothing they could do.

Just like Louisiana had said, their spacesuits were pressurized, but they could not even open the elevator car’s door until they left the thermosphere.

She spoke to Quenser in a provocative way.

“Now, how do you intend to reach a conclusion not even I could predict, boy?”

Even if it had a heat-resistant reactive material mixed in, that hunk of steel was holding together surprisingly well. It was not often that being nuke-resistant turned out to be a bad thing.

The shooting star did more than fall in a straight line. Even after the Pilot Elite’s death, the cannons must have been moving automatically to manipulate its air resistance. Its course had taken a gradual curve that made it fall in a large spiral around Mother Lady.

According to Heivia’s multipurpose scope, the spiral had a radius of about 10 kilometers.

In the astronomical terms of outer space, that was razor thin.

“We won’t have many opportunities,” said Quenser. “We passed the falling Object, but we can’t go after it whenever we want. We need to move out ahead of it, stop the elevator, and then concentrate our attacks on it. Then we move the elevator again to rapidly descend before it can pass us. Then we repeat that. The Object will continue to fall the entire time, of course. If each phase lasts a few minutes, then that only gives us two or three chances.”

A beam of light assaulted their eyes with the orange afterimage of burned air. It must have come from the surface, but they had not seen that part of the process. Only the end result reached them. The Baby Magnum had fired one of its laser beam main cannons.

Heivia's eyes bugged out.

"What is the Princess doing!? She completely missed! When you pull out, the polite thing to do is go for some bukkake!!"

"Aiming for the face or boobs isn't polite - it's a fetish. Besides, that was a standard test shot. After all, she has the ionosphere between her and here, which will mess with her aim. Once she corrects for the margin of error, she'll send a shower of cannon fire this way."

That was exactly what happened.

A terribly unprofitable fireworks show began. An interception operation did not require the finesse of a sniper who could accurately hit a target from a distance. You could fire a million shots from the ground and the operation succeeded if just one of them scored a clean hit. All the likely coordinates had been marked and main cannon laser beams were fired at every last one of them. Objects had crushed the military theory of quantity over quality, so it could do that all on its own.

Also, battles between Objects occurred at distances of 10 kilometers.

Even a First Generation designed to shoot down ballistic missiles could accurately hit a target from that distance.

The fearsome white light was like watching a nuclear explosion.

It was several dozens of times brighter than welding light.

A laser beam struck the enemy Object's armor.

"Owww!! My eyes! My temples!"

"Did she get it!?" shouted Quenser.

The Baby Magnum's main cannon did stab straight through the center of the burning fireball and the light grew all the brighter.

But that was all.

The main reactor had already been stopped, so this blast did not trigger a further explosion. The Object had already ceased to function and it was continuing to fall as a mere corpse. This only did minor surface damage.

“Are you kidding me?” muttered Heivia in a daze.

The laser beams from the surface could do minor damage. And even that damage was soon swallowed up as the armor was melted into an orange glow by the friction.

“This is insane!! Isn’t this supposed to be a battle between Objects!? Maybe it won’t blow up, but why can’t this at least be as damaging as tearing the legs off of a dead bug lying on its back!?”

“She’s just too far away. Not even an Object’s main cannon can produce its usual power at this range.”

It was a miracle that the laser beam had made it this high at all. In the pressure of the earth’s atmosphere, the energy would probably have weakened to the point of vanishing before traveling this same distance.

Quenser gulped, but still answered.

If they could not face the situation they were in, they could never make any progress.

“Also, an ordinary ballistic missile can be brought down with only minor damage to the surface. Missiles and rockets are mostly just big tanks of fuel with a bare minimum of sensors and tailfins added on. Do any damage anywhere and they’ll break apart on their own. But that doesn’t work with a 200,000ton mass with its reactor stopped.”

They could not just destroy it.

More beams of light shot out, but the Princess seemed to be having trouble enough just hitting it. She was only successful about 1% of the time and those hits caused no real change in the World’s End. It was looking unlikely that its trajectory would change or that it would break apart.

“D-didn’t the elevator have a long-range laser!?” asked Heivia.

“Getting the angle right would be hard. They wouldn’t want it to be able to damage their own space station.”

Heivia groaned while ignoring the pain in his eyes and temples.

“Isn’t there any way we can get that thing to blow up!? It’s moving its exterior weaponry to alter its air resistance and create that spiraling path, so it’s reactor must be running!!”

Louisiana shrugged at the delinquent soldier’s suggestion.

"It's hard to say how intentional that is, but either way, I imagine it is using its spare batteries. It can still perform some emergency operations without its JPlevelMHD reactor. But that only means moving its main cannons, not using a propulsion device to keep its 200,000tons floating above the ground or firing raligns, low-stability plasma cannons, or other main cannons."

They had already known that the Princess alone could not solve this.

It was wrong to force responsibility for the world's fate onto her.

That was why Quenser had chosen not to remain out on the space station and to instead make this descent.

The Princess was not alone.

The entire 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion would carry this burden together.

Quenser Barbotage stared out the window at the orange burning light that's descent was a more accurate countdown than any time bomb.

"Now, it's time to fight with the fate of the world hanging in the balance."

"But can see you see yet who is saving what?" asked Louisiana.

Part 3

Of course she was going to run.

At the rocket launch site in the Amazon District of South America, Major Frolaytia Capistrano folded up her laptop, held it under her arm, and wiped sweat from her brow with her other arm.

"Now, where's the closest shelter!?"

"I will accompany you wherever you go, Major."

The 12-year-old genius girl's clever brain had already learned how to suck up.

This giant facility was like a corn field of multi-stage rockets and space shuttles, so it was bound to have a largescale underground shelter in case all that liquid fuel or oxidants were to detonate. Of course, that was not listed on the official site since the management did not want to give people the impression that accidents were even possible.

“Oh.”

“It’s you.”

She ran into an Information Alliance commander with silver hair and bright brown skin.

Lendy Farolito was a lieutenant colonel, but there was no need to show respect to someone from an enemy army.

Lendy was accompanied by a large, muscular man who was presumably a subordinate of hers.

“You too, huh?” she said with a wink.

“I suppose so, yes.”

Even with the treaties protecting space development, it was unnatural to have all four world powers mixed together at one base.

“I didn’t expect you to hire a 12-year-old secretary and keep her around at all times. Does the Legitimacy Kingdom have a project of its own to match the Capitalist Corporations’ talent trafficking and our Information Alliance’s Martini Series?”

“?”

“Hm, but it is a shame to ruin such a wonderful little girl with the Legitimacy Kingdom title. But if you framed it as a poor idol whose every effort goes to waste, she might actually sell very well indeed. You aren’t trying to muscle in on our territory, are you?”

“This short conversation has been more than enough to know you’re a pervert, so please, not another word. How in the world did you know at a glance that she’s exactly 12?”

The Legitimacy Kingdom’s Frolaytia and the Information Alliance’s Lendy both descended some narrow, unmarked stairs and opened a small rusty metal door to find a large door similar to a bank vault less than 2m away. They also had assault rifles aimed at them from either side.

Frolaytia did not even remove the long, narrow kiseru from her mouth.

“I am Legitimacy Kingdom 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion Remote Commander Frolaytia Capistrano,” she said with a wink.

“And I am Information Alliance Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito. That is all the information you get

since any more would carry monetary value. Now, is that not enough to grant us entrance?"

"Our apologies, ma'ams!!"

The assault rifles were raised to aim at the ceiling instead.

After working some kind of controls, the large door slowly opened.

Lendy walked right on through with the muscular man in tow, but Frolaytia did not. The silver-haired busty beauty gestured the armed soldiers toward her.

"Those are Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms, aren't they? You are exactly what I needed, so come with me."

"But..."

"Do you want to spend earth's final day standing outside until the shockwave splatters you against the wall? What did you think of the VIPs marching in here with those self-satisfied grins on their faces?"

"..."

"You get why I'm here now, don't you? Let's make one of our dreams come true right at the very end, shall we? So again, come with me. This is an order, but it is also one of the few gifts I am capable of giving you."

"Should we thank you?"

"That is entirely dependent on your morals and conscience. Okay, you will now act as my bodyguards, so throw out those puny assault rifles. You can find SAWs just about anywhere around here, can't you? And make sure to bring plenty of box magazines just in case we need them."

The area through the door was enormous.

The darkness was swept aside by halogen lights installed at even intervals much like in a school gym, but the area it covered was even larger than a baseball field. The entire space was indoors, but the opposite wall was barely visible as it faded away into darkness. The place had to be measured in units of kilometers. And this may not have been the only space. This was only the entranceway immediately through the front door. The areas branching horizontally off from here were also kept secret.

Lendy turned back and noticed Frolaytia had invited the guards in with her.

“How kind of you.”

“Tell that to the VIPs here.”

The 12-year-old genius girl clung to the side of Frolaytia’s hip. She almost looked like a lost child trying to find her mother.

“This is more than I ever imagined, Major.”

“Yes, I’m sure it officially began as a secret underground bunker in case of a fuel explosion, but it has been continuously expanded on since then.”

Underground shelters were not popular during the post-nuclear age of clean wars, so where had all the funding come from? Objects were said to cost an average of 5 billion dollars each, but they were developed for the prestige of the international world powers. As a star industry, their projects were often given absurd amounts of money.

“Is it like year-end roadwork?” asked Frolaytia. “Did the VIPs of the four world powers dump all their excess budget into this so they wouldn’t have to give it up for the next fiscal year?”

“That would explain why the wars never seem to end,” said Lendy.

“Wouldn’t you be in trouble if war did end?”

“Sorry, but unlike a barbarian like you, I have a second job.”

Some of the people here noticed their presence.

The world was about to end, but one fat noble was wearing a tailcoat. That suggested there was an amusement park or hotel with a casino further inside. He was accompanied by several people, but Frolaytia doubted they were his family. Those young women had to be his mistresses.

“My, my. If it isn’t the Capistrano daughter! I didn’t realize you had the necessary connections.”

“Good day, Mister Waterbury. I have my defense job to thank for this.” The silver-haired busty noblewoman put on her brightest smile. “But this is my first time inside, so I didn’t realize how big the place was.”

“Oh, don’t let this surprise you. This is only the entranceway. We have an entire miniature earth

down here. You can race horses and hunt foxes if you want. And there is a large hospital, so your health is assured too.”

“But won’t that large scale require a lot of supplies? I’m worried about the water and food supply.”

“Ha ha ha. Don’t let that bother you. The sunlight might not reach us, but we can still grow vegetables with UV lights. And they can be harvested more than 25 times every year. Plus, those vegetables can be used to raise livestock for meat. They have imported the DNA for all the finest brand-name cows and pigs from around the world, so even if humanity dies out aboveground, we can still enjoy the same 5-star meals we did in our home country.”

“Is that what this place is for?”

“Indeed it is.” The man grinned. “No matter how inhospitable the outside environment, we are guaranteed the finest and rarest of biological resources in here. It could be an ice age out there and we would still have all the food and medicine we require. This shelter is all we need. And if some people do survive in the outside world, this will provide us with endless privilege. We will be the kings providing charity to the starving masses.”

“I see. That would explain why I also see Lord Bosom-Caresser and the son of the Bananabliss family.”

“You have a sharp eye. You see the purpose of this place now, I assume?”

“I do,” said Frolaytia as if she were impressed.

No, not “as if”. In a way, she really was impressed.

And then she snapped her fingers.

Things immediately changed.

The guards waiting on her either side each aimed a SAW - a slimmed-down machinegun capable of single-handedly holding off an enemy charge - at the fools gathered here.

Not just at the fat noble.

The rest of the privileged class who had fled to this vast space also froze.

They did not even bother asking what was happening. Frolaytia had been expecting to fight a small war down here, so it was kind of a letdown.

"I can't believe this." The dom queen brushed up her bangs with a hand and clenched her teeth hard enough to nearly break her kiseru. "Every last one of them is a noble with a focus on space development. I'm honestly impressed at how shockingly grotesque the Legitimacy Kingdom can be. This world might just be destroyed today, but all you idiots decided to die here ahead of time."

"Wh-what?"

The bastard turned toward the beautiful commander from the enemy Information Alliance hoping she might save him, but then he froze again.

"I have no interest in tear-jerking discussions of morality and I am perfectly fine with people prioritizing their own survival." Lendy Farolito had just casually received a full-auto shotgun from the muscular man accompanying her. And not to fight back against the rogue Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. "But the fact that you did not call off her space concert means the chosen VIPs here were telling her to stay outside the shelter and die. And while the phrase seems wholly inadequate a punishment for such an act, it will have to do: I hope you burn in hell for all eternity□"

At this point, it did not matter how many tens of thousands there were in the shelter.

With SAWs and a full-auto shotgun, they had enough firepower to mow down the crowds even if the crowds panicked and rushed them.

Things might have played out differently if the black-hearted VIPs had kept their fully-equipped bodyguards with them, but...

(They're willing to bring their favorite mistresses with them, but the bodyguards that had risked their lives to protect them for many long years were left to die. The age of chivalry really is dead.)

Frolaytia exhaled some smoke in annoyance.

She was used to seeing the Legitimacy Kingdom elite being garbage, but she did not like for the other world powers to see that garbage.

Of course, this launch site was open to any of the world powers, so Lendy may have been grimacing on the inside after spotting some people she knew.

"Space development just isn't popular anymore," stated Frolaytia in an accusatory way. "The Capitalist Corporations may be a special case since their major corporations control their government, but space development is being privatized elsewhere too. The government would prefer to lead space development so a company filled with civilians isn't the one developing ballistic missiles or some new weapon, but if the profit isn't there, those efforts are rated poorly. It's just like the relationship between the wealthy gangs and the poor police during the age of prohibition. We live in a world where bankers and government workers work under a demerit system, so no one

wants to take the risk.”

So they had changed their focus.

Using space technology for space would only lead to further debt, so they would instead use space technology for other things. If they could use it in a more agreeable environment, they could greatly reduce the maintenance and inspection costs.

If they had a place to use that tech on earth, they could dig themselves out of the red.

In a massive but enclosed shelter like this, a self-sustained system that endlessly provided food and water was indispensable and thus an endless moneymaker. And if things grew unbalanced and the supplies were insufficient, they could try using cold sleep to reduce the number of consumers. They could rebalance things by temporarily reducing the number of mouths to feed. If even that was not enough, they only had to try putting everyone in cold sleep. When they woke up thousands or tens of thousands of years into the future, the seemingly endless ice age would have ended and an age of plenty would be upon them.

If you were in here, you were one of the winners.

Were there ten thousand or twenty thousand people in here? It could not be more than 100 thousand. But that was enough. As long as they could control the endless cycle contained in this shelter, they did not care at all what happened to the 6 or 7 billion other people up on the surface.

There really were fools who thought that way. There really were people stupid enough to believe that qualified as happiness.

“Why?” asked the silver-haired busty queen.

Even if Louisiana Honeysuckle was a genius scientist, this shelter felt too well prepared. From the materials to the architectural planning, the space elevator had to have involved hundreds or even thousands of specialized fields. She could not have done it all herself even if she was as multitalented as Da Vinci.

Some idiots had helped her.

Enough of them to fill those hundreds or even thousands of specialized fields.

Since 7th Core from the Capitalist Corporations had not known exactly what she was up to despite being the original funders, she had likely received secret assistance from all four world powers.

“And that was enough to construct this enormous facility and fill it with supplies?”

“Yes, they were so well-prepared it makes you suspect they knew this was going to happen in advance.”

Lendy Farolito was thinly smiling even now.

Frolaytia Capistrano removed her kiseru from her mouth and exhaled.

The military knew exactly how to deal with traitors.

The guards were required to obey orders, so they had only been able to grin and bear it as they guided those chosen people through the entrance.

“Shoot all of them but this one. That’s an order.”

The shelter was quickly stained red.

It made for a decent massacre.

“See, I told you it would go easier with the SAWs. ‘The Southern England Lawnmower’ really is the perfect nickname for them. Truly superb weapons.”

“In what way? I swear the noise was holding them back more than the bullets. And I’m pretty sure you were swapping out the red-hot barrels more often than the box magazines.”

Frolaytia Capistrano’s only response was to relight her kiseru.

Lendy Farolito handed her full-auto shotgun back to her muscular bodyguard now that she was done with it.

Neither one had batted an eye.

“Was there a conspiracy beyond monopolizing possible drug ingredients?”

“...”

“I’ll take that as a no. Or maybe they just never bothered telling you.”

Frolaytia pulled out her own handgun and casually shot the last one.

Louisiana Honeysuckle was not the reclusive sort of genius. She apparently knew how to control

people through their common desires. Just like the gangs of prohibition had taken control of society using alcohol, drugs, and prostitution to defang so many government workers and merchants. But that was why Frolaytia doubted this was over. The uniform environment and the shelter had only been bait. Which meant...

(Assuming she didn't lose sight of her own goal along the way, there must be something more to this.)

"Ew," groaned the 12-year-old genius girl as the powerful stench of blood reached her while she clung to Frolaytia's hip.

"S-so we weren't evacuating to the shelter?"

"Of course not." Frolaytia exhaled some sweet smoke and winked. "What, were you hoping to be one of them?"

"No, no, no!!" shouted the genius girl while vigorously shaking her head. "We must do something about the falling Capitalist Corporations Object so we can protect our planet and provide a bright future for our Legitimacy Kingdom!!"

Now that they had cut away the excess fat here, it was time to fight the good fight.

Part 4

A tense silence hung over them all.

The elevator car was only about the size of a large tour bus. It of course artificially maintained a survivable level of oxygen, pressure, temperature, humidity, and more, but all of the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes onboard had to be thinking it was an execution device that cost tens of billions of dollars to build.

The thermosphere was long.

It was 400km from top to bottom. Even if they were falling rapidly through it on an elevator with broken safety devices, they could not open the door as casually as with a convenience store microwave.

They could see the giant orange fireball out the window.

That hammer would bring doom to the world.

They could all see it, but none of them could reach out and do anything about it. Thanks to their

similar relative speeds, it was easy to forget just how fast they were falling. It felt more like they were floating through the air in a hot-air balloon.

200,000 tons would be enough to wipe out humanity.

“I will...” Heivia Winchell muttered to himself while seated with his knees pulled up to his chest. “I will inherit the Winchell family. I refuse to die here, dammit. I have a cute fiancée waiting for me down there, so why is this happening?”

The way he was curled up with his head in his hands was probably pretty serious, but appearance was everything. It ended up looking humorous given the oversized head of the spacesuit. And since Quenser was in the same elevator car, he really wished the boy would stop bringing up marriage in this crisis situation. He did not want to die because of Heivia’s jinx.

“Ah, ahh, ahhhh,” groaned Myonri from another part of the car. She appeared to have discovered something in the drawer below her seat. “They have vacuum-packed hamburger steak...and is this lasagna!? Ugh, there’s so much food here and I can’t eat it because of this stupid helmet.”

Quenser also wanted her to stop talking about a last supper. What was he going to see next? A black cat or crow crossing his path despite the high altitude and enclosed space?

Meanwhile...

“Phew.”

Louisiana Honeysuckle leaned her back against the wall and placed her round butt on the floor while letting her arms and legs fall limply around her. She wore a skintight special suit with a gasmask, preventing him from seeing a single hair on her head, but he could still tell just how relaxed her body was.

She seemed awfully confident.

Or so he thought, but then he realized what this really was.

“Hold on. Don’t tell me...”

“Ha ha. It’s been 150 days since I felt any real gravity.”

Her head tilted to the side and did not rise back up.

She tried to wave her hand while seated on the floor with her back against the wall, but she could

not even lift her hand.

When she almost slid to the side, Quenser propped her up on reflex. She could not even move her legs sprawled out on the floor, so they only trembled unnaturally while she spoke.

“I will be stuck like this until I get used to it. But don’t worry. I have been working to make sure my muscles and bones do not deteriorate. I should be able to stand once I grow accustomed to the sensation.”

“How long will that take?”

“Not long. I will have recovered by the time we contact the Elinabell.”

He certainly hoped so.

She had to take responsibility for what she had done. She might be an enemy, but no one understood space or the elevator better than her.

She could not resist at all right now and she had to know they could easily kill her, but the Capitalist Corporations genius girl remained confident even while surrounded by Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. She seemed more curious about Quenser than the guns aimed at her.

“My muscles themselves have not deteriorated, so don’t worry - there is no risk of me embarrassing myself by carelessly relaxing my bladder.”

“Why that hypothetical in particular?”

Quenser could sense a few sharp gazes focusing this way. No one was saying it, but some of the others clearly thought they should go ahead and execute the villain who had pulled the trigger on humanity’s doom.

Louisiana ignored that and spoke to him while leaning on him for support.

“Why did you come to space?”

“For my job.”

“That is a soldier’s response. You are a student, so it does not apply to you.”

Her heated breath escaped as a quiet laugh.

She was as limp as someone collapsing after running a full marathon, but she continued speaking nonetheless.

She had built all this after graduating from a safe country university, so she had accomplished more or less what Quenser hoped to. And their ages were not all that different.

“Was it the Objects?” asked the genius girl.

“...”

“There were a few battlefield students at our university, which really just made for a few empty seats during graduation. The cost-performance of that option is not all that great. You may have signed up thinking it as a shortcut to striking it rich, but did you actually crunch the numbers? And I don’t mean following the flowchart on the flimsy pamphlet the school gave you. I mean using a massive formula on the level of an insurance company’s risk simulator.”

“I’m a commoner, so this was my only chance for any real success.”

“That idea was planted in your head by the people hoping to use you.” Louisiana snorted with laughter and spoke to the worried student from her position as a graduate who had already entered society. “The adults control people in one of two ways - they either praise you or disparage you. It was the same with me. The only thing schools teach you is how to study. And when the adults develop talent in someone, they want to use that talent for their own purposes. If I had never seen the beauty of Africa, I would never have questioned any of it and ended up holed up in a safe country office or research institute. I would have convinced myself I was happy and worked myself to death for some company while everyone around me assumed I was an eccentric who chose for herself to live in that bug cage.”

“The Turkana District changed that?”

“That is my holy land. There I found so much that I could not explain with my talent alone. It taught me that the world has more rules than the ones I believed in.”

The boy did a double take.

Louisiana Honeysuckle apparently had no intention of taking back what she had said.

“My brother Sladder’s failure was not in insisting on the mass driver system even after the rest of the world moved on. His failure was in never finding a lifechanging experience like mine in the Turkana District. That is why he could never see past his own set of rules and could only talk about himself. He became the lonely and boring sort of genius who had nothing left once the mass driver was taken from him.”

Quenser was dumbfounded. What was she talking about? She had caused all of this and there was no denying that. There was no chance of some shocking reveal of a true villain at this point. This felt like an even greater surprise than when he had encountered that space Object.

Because...

“Which Turkana District are you picturing in your head?”

“...”

“Because this space elevator destroyed the one you knew!! The verdant land and the many wild animals are all gone. All the water has been sucked from the ground, leaving nothing but a dried and cracked land covered in guerillas who reek of blood and gun smoke!! You did that. Maybe the world would have continued to ignore the Turkana District if you hadn’t done anything, but it also would have been spared the devastation you brought with Mother Lady! No, we didn’t hesitate to kill them. We didn’t give a single thought to how they felt after being made the villains of the world. But that’s because you told the whole world they were villains, Louisiana!!”

A short silence followed.

This may have been a first.

The words of a completely ordinary person had stabbed into that genius’s heart.

“Even so...”

Her voice was not quite a whisper and not quite a groan, but it was vanishingly quiet.

She spoke clearly even as she was helplessly propped up in his arms.

“I will still repay them. I have escaped a life where I simply follow the university’s recommendations and become a simple cog in a corporate machine. And I will repay the Turkana District for giving me that chance. I will do whatever it takes to do that.”

It was no use.

He had managed to land a scratch, but that was not enough to tear down the thick mental barrier.

He did not see how that dried and barren land void of all plant life could ever lead to repaying the Turkana District. Or was her idea of happiness to fill in the existing ocean with concrete, toss in foreign fish that would destroy the existing ecosystem, and smile while showing off how they could

catch as many exotic fish as they liked?

How was that any different from a serial killer who went around brutally killing young girls and then proudly announcing that he had given them some “pretty makeup”!?

“I don’t understand.”

“Are you sure about that?”

She seemed to be laughing.

Maybe at Quenser, but maybe at herself.

She continued speaking while leaning against him.

“Study Objects long enough and you will realize the truth. You might be taking a different path, but we are climbing the same mountain. Once you reach the summit, you will see the same thing I do.”

“...”

“And when you look out from the summit, you will experience true despair. You will wish you had never seen it.”

Part 5

At an altitude of 80km, they were leaving the thermosphere and entering the mesosphere.

“We’re in Area 1, Louisiana!” called Quenser in his puffy spacesuit.

“Yes, yes.”

She had adapted to earth’s gravity just as she had insisted she would.

She was still slow, but she could move her arms and legs.

Not only did she know the elevator’s structure better than anyone else, but she also had better use of her hands in that slim spacesuit that showed off her figure.

The scraping noise from the wires grew even more violent, so the multiple brake shoes must have tightened around the carbon nanotube wire.

However...

“Wait, what the hell?” Heivia looked around in a panic. “The brakes! Apply the brakes!! Why are we still slipping? Don’t tell me this handmade car has finally malfunctioned on us! What, did this thing go off prematurely!? I told you we were only edging today!!”

“It will take us at least a kilometer to decelerate. I could slam on the brakes and stop us immediately, but the inertia would squash us all flat.”

Space existed on a much larger scale, but given the length of an airplane runway, this may have actually been quite short.

Regardless, the vertical sliding continued to squeeze at Quenser’s heart until they came to a stop in midair.

The elevator car was the size of a large tour bus standing on end.

Jack-of-all-trades Myonri reached her puffy fingers toward the thick door.

“U-um, I’m going to open this now. This has a heating element inside, doesn’t it? I hope it hasn’t frozen shut.”

“Oh, you should either let the air out of the room first or attach yourself with a carabiner.”

Gasmask Girl Louisiana tried to warn her, but Myonri had already turned the heavy wheel and the door burst open on its own. Myonri immediately let go of the wheel, but she was still swept outwards.

They were 80km above the ground.

That was about 10 times the height of Everest and there was no air that high. When the pressurized room’s door burst open, it created a powerful gust of wind like the air being let out of a balloon.

“Ahhhhhh!?”

“Myonri, you idiot! Grab on!!”

Quenser immediately reached out, but he could not support her weight with just the one hand and was nearly dragged out with her. Heivia had to wrap his arms around the student’s hips to pull them both back inside.

“Th-that was way too close.”

Heivia gulped while unable to wipe the sweat from his face through the thick helmet, but then he heard a dry crackling sound. It may have actually taken him a moment to notice since he was too close to the source.

White frost was spreading across his helmet’s visor starting from one end.

Quenser glanced down at the computer on his arm to find it was dead. Was that thanks to the special EM waves, or due to the extreme cold?

Louisiana casually provided another warning inside her black and yellow special suit.

But not about the cold.

“Oh, and needless to say, this is the mesosphere. We aren’t protected by the ozone layer here, so we’re exposed to the full force of the sun’s radiation. Are your electronics okay? Let’s hope your Legitimacy Kingdom spacesuits can handle this.”

“Are you kidding me!?! How many ways can this battlefield kill you before the fighting even begins!?”

“You are viewing this all backwards. We are in outer space, so you don’t need a special reason to die. Here, you need a special reason to survive.”

“So we’ve got less chance at life than the sticky goo balled up in a tissue, huh?”

But now was not the time for introspection through Zen dialogue.

The Capitalist Corporations’ Federation of Elevator Industries’ World’s End was plummeting toward the earth as a colossal fireball. They were still positioned below it, but other than the spiral course it had taken using air resistance, it was essentially in a freefall. It was in gravity’s grasp, so it would not just come to a stop in midair.

They had been 500km up, but they could not do anything while in the thermosphere, so they had ended up down at 80km. This was the earth’s time limit. If they could not cause the nuke-resistant Object to break up in midair, today would be the planet’s final day.

“Let’s do this, Heivia, Myonri. The instant its altitude matches ours is our best chance.”

“But what exactly are we supposed to do?” Myonri panicked inside her puffy spacesuit while Quenser continued to hold onto her from behind. “Not only can it survive a nuke, but it’s falling in a

spiral with a radius of about 10km. That's a range of 10,000 meters. That's outside the range of a specialized sniper rifle, not to mention our ordinary assault rifles!"

"Are our missiles the only viable weapons? Hey, everyone, gather up every one we've got. How many do we have left!?"

While still cautious of the open door, everyone laid their weapons out on the floor, revealing they had 30 missiles left. However, around half of them gave no response to the tester. The radiation may have damaged their sensors. That meant they could not even be launched.

"That giant bomb is falling toward the surface and this is all we've got to work with?" asked Heivia. "Can't we ever catch a break, dammit? How can we possibly win this?"

"There's no use complaining now," said Myonri. "Besides, you should have known your luck ran out from the moment you were assigned to the 37th. Anyway, the Object is coming. It should be- ahhhh!?"

Myonri screamed after noticing something.

After being hit by more of an invisible wall than a noise, Quenser and the others were thrown to the floor and the sturdy elevator car shook unnaturally.

The World's End fireball had arrived.

It looked different than it had out in space. Instead of an orange-glowing mass, it was more of a white light, similar to a camera flash or welding light. Just looking at it felt like it was damaging your eyes, but more than that, the roar of its shockwave reached them from at least 10km away.

That meant there was air here.

There was far too little to support life, but sound could still travel through it.

"Ah!"

Heivia noticed something and quickly reached out his hand while still lying on the floor. A few of the missiles lined up on the floor rolled on out through the airlock. And they were all ones they had sorted into the "still working" category.

He could only scream unintelligibly.

"Nwahhhh!! Gwohhhhh!?"

“Shove the rest in your launchers before we lose any more! Hurry!!”

They were of course closest to the Object when their altitudes matched. Without needing to include the height difference in the calculation, their range was exactly 10km.

Heivia and Myonri leaned out through the door at the same time to aim the launchers on their shoulders.

Quenser had nothing to do, so he quickly ducked down just before the two shoulder-fired missiles were launched. The white smoke ejected from the back filled the car. Their helmets meant there was no need to cough, but being unable to see was still frightening. Everything they did seemed to work against them, so Quenser was afraid he would roll on out.

“Dammit!!” groaned Heivia.

“What happened?”

“They won’t fly straight! What, is the air too thin for a stable flight!?”

That made sense, but they had brought this equipment along to use in space. How had they used them out there?

Louisiana sighed behind her helmet.

“The tail fins wouldn’t do anything out in empty space, so you just used them as straight-flying rockets, didn’t you? But as thin as the air is up here, we are still in the grasp of earth’s gravity. They will not fly straight like they did in zero-g.”

They really could not catch a break.

They watched as the World’s End continued to drop in its spiral that maintained a 10km radius around the elevator wires. It dropped below them once more. They could see it, but they could do nothing about it. They knew the earth would be destroyed, but they lacked the equipment. They could not play a role here.

“What do we do?” asked a dazed Heivia with his useless missile launcher dangling from his hand.

Their attacks could not hit.

And even if they could, what would that accomplish? What could they hope to do about that mass of metal that had remained in one piece even after having its reactor pierced through by the Baby

Magnum's main cannon?

"These tiny missiles aren't going to do jack shit, but what else can we even do!?"

Part 6

The artificial air felt heavy.

The elevator was now dropping them toward the hopeless pits of hell.

Area 2 was 40km up. That was still taller than Everest and above the ozone layer.

But specialized high-altitude spy planes would reach altitudes of around 35km, so they had left space and entered at the world of airplanes.

They would not get another chance after this one.

None of their attacks could damage the Object. They could only sit idly by and wait for it to destroy the earth.

(Think.)

Quenser hung his head as they dropped toward fateful Area 2.

(The ordinary logic of bullets and bombs won't work. This thing exists on an enormous scale, so we need to hit it with an equally enormous scale. We're currently riding a space elevator, so there has to be a way to use that as an attack!!)

"We're too close to earth to call this outer space anymore."

Quenser slowly turned his head inside his spacesuit. He could not believe his eyes. Genius Scientist Louisiana Honeysuckle had crossed her legs and looked terribly bored despite the crisis situation. She looked no different from someone waiting on the sofa at a barbershop after setting up an appointment but finding the previous customer's haircut was running long.

Even though she had the expertise to calculate out the damage the Object's impact would cause better than anyone else.

Did she really believe this would save the world? She still had the air of someone who felt no need to explain the reason why you separated out you sorted your trash.

She appeared to have fully adapted to earth's gravity. She was seated on the floor, but she was sitting up with plenty of strength in her back.

"This will be over soon," quietly stated the gasmask girl.

"You sure are calm for someone who's going to lose her home just like the rest of us!!"

"The giant meteor is just one of many theories. This might not actually do much of anything."

"..."

"Humanity has never gone extinct before, so we can't say for sure what would cause it, can we? The dinosaurs went extinct due to the ice age and the rulers of the planet eventually shifted from the reptiles to the mammals. That much we know to be true, but we still don't actually know what exactly caused that extinction. It could have been the impact of a giant meteor, but other theories say it was weakened solar activity or largescale volcanic activity. Oh, and I believe there was one theory saying dinosaur farts clouded the planet's atmosphere."

She actually seemed to be teasing him.

It felt like speaking with a serial killer without any metal bars between them. They needed her specialized skills in the fields of space and space elevators, but rely on her too much and she would drag you into the depths.

He deeply regretted the fact that they could not just kill her right here.

She understood her position perfectly.

She knew none of them could kill her.

Quiet static ran through his helmet as he received a transmission from the Princess down on the surface.

"Quenser?"

"What is it, Princess?"

"How far have you descended? If you move back up now, your group there might be able to survive."

"Unfortunately, we removed all the safety devices to get the speed we needed. That allows us to accelerate, but it also makes this a one-way trip. We can't go back up."

"I see. That's too bad."

That was not sarcasm. It was just like the Princess to express genuine disappointment here.

Quenser could not help but smile.

"That's awfully fainthearted for you. Anyway, we've passed the ionosphere, so your targeting should be more accurate now."

"That is about the only positive side of this situation, isn't it? But you saw what happened when I scored a direct hit, didn't you? It wasn't enough."

Quenser decided to count it as a plus that she was letting him see this fainthearted side of her.

If she had continued to embellish the data out of fear or pride, he doubted they would have had any chance of success.

"Quenser, I really wish you could have stayed out in space."

"No, thank you. Then I wouldn't have anywhere to spend the fortune I'm going to earn one day."

Just then, some kind of large mass passed right by their elevator car.

"Wah!?"

Myonri must have gained a fear of heights after nearly being dumped outside earlier. She cowered down, reflexively clung to Quenser since he was nearby, and shrieked. But it felt a lot like two big mascot costumes hugging each other, so it was not as nice an experience as he would have hoped.

"What was that!?"

"The elevator has more than one wire." Louisiana sounded exasperated. "There are several of them lined up in parallel. And some unmanned cargo containers were left hanging after you took over."

"Cargo containers!?" Heivia leaned forward. "So they're full of Capitalist Corporations weapons!? We can use those!!"

"If you want to grab some, feel free to open that door and jump on over. Our current altitude...just passed below 50km. That's about 5 times Everest, but if you really think you can jump to the elevator with the intense winds of that height, be my guest. And don't forget you have to do it in those oversized spacesuits that aren't great for athletics. Oh, and you also have to worry about the

regular vibration of the elevator wires.”

“I’m gonna kill you!!!!!!”

“How many times have you made that empty threat now? You’re as bad as that uncle who always tells the same story every time you see him.”

Quenser watched that hopeless conversation.

This might be his last chance to speak with the Princess, but he forgot all about his exchange with her.

“Quenser?” she said.

“The elevator wires have a regular vibration?” he muttered.

“All forms of matter have a normal mode frequency.” Louisiana heard that and responded with her legs still crossed. “Not even cutting-edge carbon nanotubes can ignore the laws of physics. Now, what was that frequency with wires 100,000km long?”

“...”

(The wires are not just being blown in the wind. They wobble and then return. That means they have an elasticity that snaps them back to normal. They’re 100,000km long, an empty car has been left hanging, and it’s full of Capitalist Corporations weapons. Wait...wait, wait. That scale might just be big enough. And it’s within our reach!!)

“Louisiana!”

“Yes?”

“Skip past Area 2! Take us even lower!!”

The shocked reaction came from Heivia, Myonri, and the others instead of Louisiana herself.

“Why would you waste our final chance to avoid blowing our load here!?” shouted Heivia.

“Letting it leak out little by little isn’t any better. Besides, what would we even accomplish if we stopped here? Our assault rifles can’t reach it and the missiles won’t fly on course.”

“...”

“So we need to gather up every chance we’ve got and make one definitive blow to end it all. We only have one shot at this. We can’t destroy the falling World’s End otherwise!!”

“One definitive blow?” calmly asked Louisiana Honeysuckle. “Do you have an actual vision of what that might be?”

Now, which side was she asking that question from? Was she a member of the Federation of Elevator Industries concerned Quenser might actually be to stop her final attack, or was she just a human who had found some hope of successfully stopping this?

Either way, the puny boy gave his answer.

“We only have one shot at this.”

He lifted the cracked visor of his helmet and looked his awful friend straight in the eye.

“Are you going to keep trying in vain until we’re all dead, or are you going to aim for one definitive blow? Choose, Heivia. This is the final decision!!”

Part 7

The elevator car dropped and dropped until it finally came to a stop.

They were less than 2000m above the Turkana District of Africa. That was a significant altitude during a normal life, but it might as well have been right down on the ground for Quenser’s group. Even at that height, the cracked desert was the only thing visible as far as the eye could see.

This land had made Louisiana Honeysuckle who she was, but it was also the land destroyed by that genius girl who insisted she was saving the world.

They could not descend any further.

After removing their cumbersome spacesuits, they opened the thick door and immediately stepped out.

But they did not fall.

They were at the top of the “spear” that jutted up from the ground base in order to gather Mother Lady’s wires. The spear was hollow like macaroni and they were standing on its outer edge. The

elevator car moved when exposed to microwaves and those were probably sent directly from within the tube when outside the range of the parabolic antenna, but they were not interested in that.

They had descended all this way without stopping again, so the falling World's End was still a lot higher up. But they could still see its sinister light shining like a second sun in the sky. In a few more minutes, it would crash into the Turkana District desert as a single large mass.

"Princess!!"

"Yes, Quenser?"

"I want to know the falling Object's exact course. Share it on my mobile device."

"Understood."

"Your anti-air radars can detect everything up there, right? Give me the location of any elevator cars left hanging on the wires."

"?"

After confirming everyone had disembarked from the elevator car, Quenser taped a small device to its outer wall. It was the computer that had been attached to his spacesuit's arm. He used its gyro sensor to get data on the wire's vibration.

"There we go. I've got the entire wire's normal mode frequency."

"There are three cars left hanging on the wires," reported the Princess. "Their altitudes are 40km, 38km, and 15km."

"Focus on that last one!! If we're doing this, it's gotta be that one!!"

The space elevator had several wires running in parallel like on a guitar or violin. They were shaped like thin belts about 80cm wide and they were spread fairly far apart so they could handle several elevator cars the size of large buses. They were all gathered here at the top of the spear. The car they wanted was 13,000m above them, but the wire it was connected to was within reach.

Quenser pulled out his Hand Axe plastic explosive and stabbed in a pen-shaped electric fuse. He did not hesitate to attach it to the belt of carbon nanotube.

(I know the timing. 9, 8, 7, 6...)

“Stand back! I’m gonna detonate it!!”

He did so.

An ear-splitting roar burst out.

That military explosive could incapacitate a tank when used right, but it was not enough to snap the carbon nanotube wire.

Louisiana put her hands on her hips and looked up into the blue sky. What did the world look like through the round eyepieces of her gasmask?

“Was one blast enough?” she asked.

“You already know the answer, don’t you? Shaking it randomly would be meaningless. But if you know its normal mode frequency, this can work!”

It was the same as a tin can telephone.

Any kind of impact would travel up a taut wire as a vibration.

And that 100,000km wire was already slowly shaking at a set frequency. That was nothing harmful and the safety device in the space station would negate it if it ever exceeded acceptable limits.

That was where the Hand Axe came in.

However.

If one vibration could be used to cancel out another, one could also be used to amplify another.

“The wires aren’t just blowing in the wind. After moving in one direction, they’re brought back to their original position by a restoring force.”

“Will this really work?” asked Heivia.

There was no missing the light of the falling Object at this point. It was brighter than the real sun as it spiraled down toward the surface.

“You’re talking about using the space elevator itself as a giant bow and destroying that giant meteor with the power of the bowstring, right? That’ll never actually work!!”

This was a crazy plan and Quenser himself knew it.

But only now had he matched the colossal scale of the 200,000ton mass falling from outside the atmosphere. He could reach its level. At the very least, this had to be better than continuing to fire the occasional rifle bullet or shoulder-fired missile despite knowing that would have no effect.

Sound and vibrations traveled through solids much faster than through gasses.

Quenser was viewing the 100,000km wire as an enormous bow, but he was not a giant and he could not nock a colossal arrow on that bow. That meant he had to use what was already there. In other words, the unmanned elevator car loaded with cargo and left hanging on the wire.

The shock of his explosion joined with the wire's existing movement. Instead of canceling each other out, the two waves joined to produce a massive amplitude well beyond what the wire was designed for.

The hanging car was shaken side to side and it failed to survive the force of the impact.

So...

"Get down everyone!! It's starting!!"

It exploded and something scattered horizontally like a shotgun blast.

The shaking was a miniscule thing when compared to the entire elevator that boasted a length more than twice the circumference of the earth, but it was well beyond the design limits of the metal car, tearing it apart.

And its pieces spread out horizontally thanks to the horizontal shaking of the wire.

Which meant out toward the World's End that was just about to pass by along its spiraling path down.

There was a bright light.

That colossal weapon was glowing brighter than the sun, but even that light was swallowed up by this new one.

Quenser's calculations said it should have reached an instantaneous max speed of 14,000m/s, so this was far worse than a downpour of razor-sharp shrapnel. Most of the pieces were vaporized the instant they were launched, turning them to plasma. And this was not soft water or plastic; it was

heat-resistant metal meant to escape the atmosphere.

“Ghhhh!!”

Quenser could not even see Heivia’s face as the boy groaned and clung to the railing next to him.

The explosive light acted as a white screen that stole away the puny humans’ senses.

And.

“It wasn’t enough,” groaned Heivia while looking overhead. “It’s still in one piece!! You hit it with all that and it didn’t break. The World’s End is still coming down!!”

Part 8

At that moment...

“What if you knew the world would be destroyed tomorrow?” asked a speaker on the stage in a large school’s lecture hall. “That is a very simple hypothetical, but its simple scenario helps inspire your imagination. Now, what would you do in that situation? Would you give up and accept it, or would you fight to the end? Would you return to your old favorites one last time, or would you try to experience as many new things as you could? Your answer to these questions might just point to who you really are deep down.”

The voice spilled out into the hallway.

That’s a tricky question, thought a middle-aged man. His boss got mad at him if he did not use up his paid leave, but he had nothing to do when he did take a weekday off. That was why he had decided to take a look at his son’s school. Of course, his son was not actually here since he was a battlefield student, but the man could not have taken this look if his son was here. Teenagers loathed having their parents invade their territory.

Some called this school a den of eccentrics, but he could not see anything particular unusual about it. Then again, the eccentrics here may have been intelligent enough to blend into society when they had to.

The school contained a variety of departments that were all doing their own research and experiments, so there was a lot out on display: next-generation cities, clean energy, the possibility of developing Mars due to the limited land on the moon, etc. It was probably all arranged to be accessible to outsiders, but just reading through the names was difficult enough.

“They really are doing a lot here.”

Adults learned how to make general statements to save face at times like this. Even though they knew that avoiding the issue in that way would prevent them from learning anything new as they grew older.

There had been a time when he had thought he would know everything there was to know about the world once he grew up.

Once he had whittled away his childish side, he had assumed he would know how to rid himself of all of his childhood worries.

But in truth, growing older only led to being bowled over by how complex the world was.

He heard a beeping from the smartphone he carried mostly because his family insisted on it. He had received three messages in a row from the same person on a social media app he was still not used to using.

“Where are you?”

“I’m starving already. You aren’t out getting something to eat on your own, are you?”

“And you’re the one that got lost, right? It wasn’t me who wandered away, right!?”

He was looking after that girl at home, but she was not his blood-related daughter.

His son would sometimes come to him with a problem. Like with that girl Monica who was now living her best life as an idol.

His son was never around, but he always felt like he was closer to the boy when looking after those people for him. His son was a kind boy, so he could not sit idly by when he saw someone being slowly dragged to their doom on the conveyer belt of death. But the boy was not the best at considering the consequences of his actions, so he would sometimes find himself in a jam and need some help from his parents. But that imperfection was what made him so adorable.

The man did not know much about the girl living in his home.

He did not know how she had ended up with him, what problems she carried, or what secrets she held. His mind had grown so inflexible in adulthood he could not even imagine the answers to those questions.

But that was fine with him.

A father was there to help when his child came to him.

He was working to be the kind of man he felt his former childish self would have been proud of.

At that moment...

A girl was walking down a large road. This metropolis was seen as the world's safest home country, but she still should not have been walking around without any bodyguards. She was the daughter of the Vanderbilt family. As usual, she climbed through a window, cut across a women's locker room, removed her security buzzer that constantly tracked her location, tossed it into the air so it caught on a delivery drone passing by, and managed to escape the cramped parade of black bulletproof vehicles that insisted on following her around.

(There isn't even anywhere I want to go this time. I think I've started to enjoy simply outwitting those professionals.)

She was aware she was developing into something like a wealthy shoplifter, but she still enjoyed the brief freedom this bought her.

A few smiling children ran past her. There were a lot of food stalls along the side of the street. She wondered if they were holding some kind of event here, but then she saw the poster on the side of a streetlight and quickly hid behind a vending machine.

The poster said, "This is the place if you want to catch a glimpse of the Vanderbilt daughter! She passes through here on the way to and from her lessons!!"

(H-has this country never heard of privacy!?)

She had thought the crepes, ice cream, roe pasta, and hot dogs sold at the food stalls were oddly well matched to her tastes, but that was apparently the result of careful research. And the stands along the road were not just selling food. They also sold opera glasses, zoom lenses for phones, and even disposable cameras in this modern digital age. She was not quite sure how to react when she realized they were all spying tools meant for use on her.

After buying a pair of old-fashioned red and blue 3D glasses sold there as a joke and putting them on, she continued her stroll.

Her life was so restrictive and predictable, but she could still make new discoveries when she tried.

She understood none of this had just been dropped into her lap. Her peaceful life was only possible thanks to the people crawling through the mud as they moved between battlefields all over the world. She was not a military expansionist. In fact, she focused on peaceful and philanthropic

activities meant to bring an end to war. But she knew there were people out there fighting to hold things together until the day that ideal could actually be realized.

“Master Heivia,” she muttered while looking up into the sky.

It was a bright and sunny day perfect for hanging laundry out to dry, but that blue felt somehow heavy.

At that moment...

Bloodrics Capistrano entrusted himself to the rhythmic beat of hooves. Flying cars existed these days, but he was using a four-horse carriage. They were not all that unusual in a large Legitimacy Kingdom city like this. Although most of those were tourist attractions, so a carriage owned by a private family with its own dedicated coachman was indeed quite rare.

(The truly powerful families actually avoid this sort of tradition. Insisting on all the formalities is really a sign of desperately trying to look the part because you fear you will be found out as an imposter.)

He let out a gentle sigh.

“Are you sure about this?” asked the maid seated across from him.

He tilted his head.

“About what?”

“You could have taken your private jet to the shelter in your villa on the outskirts.”

Cowards gathered information because they could not rest easy without listening in on everything.

That was why they received all the information that the more powerful families might miss.

The young noble smiled a little.

“That would change nothing.”

“But...”

“What good is a dingy basement with only half a year’s worth of food and water? That’s just a slow burial over the course of half a year. It would only make for a strange sort of execution.”

Bloodrics had no one seated next to him.

The neighboring seat instead had a sheathed Island Nation sword known as a katana leaning against it. Although mastering that blade had not allowed him to protect anyone he cared about.

His smile gained a tinge of self-deprecation.

“If my adorable little sister fails, then I die too. I will accept that fate. What point is there in living in a world without Tia-chan’s smile?”

“...”

“You are awfully faithful yourself. Maids do not follow their masters into death these days. Why did you not run away?”

“Because life in a world without you would only bring me pain.”

She did not hesitate for even a second.

He recalled that she was much too skilled to be serving a small-time noble like him. With a single letter of recommendation, she could have gone knocking on the door of any family she liked - even the Winchell or Vanderbilt families. Yet she did not. There would of course be a reason for that.

Just like Bloodrics had strayed from the path laid out for him in life so he could protect his sister who refused to obey their family’s traditions and let herself be used as a tool.

This simply meant he too had someone who refused to abandon him.

“What an awkward person you are.”

“That makes two of us.”

At that moment...

A girl gripped the control column in the cockpit of a colossal nuke-resistant weapon.

This was not about her work or her private life.

She had been surrounded by emptiness, leaving her with only herself here in the cockpit as she she looked up into the sky.

“Quenser...”

Death came for everyone the same.

And wars were not determined by morality or emotions.

Part 9

Heivia had said the World’s End remained in one piece and had not broken apart after the hit from the giant bow that used the elevator as its string. It was still going to fall to the surface and wreak havoc on the planet.

And yet...

And yet...

“No.”

Quenser grimaced and rejected that idea.

He continued with a smile on his sweaty face.

“I wasn’t trying to use it as a bow.”

Louisiana Honeysuckle had said the carbon nanotube wires, which remained safe despite constant exposure to the thermosphere, could snap from the elevator car’s friction once the safety devices had been removed. Even the ordinary phenomena seen in everyday life could cause massive damage if the quantities were high enough.

And as Quenser had just proven, the elevator wire could be used like a bow or slingshot. Push on it and it did not continue that way; it had a restoring force that brought it back to its original position.

In other words...

“It’s a heating element,” whispered Quenser. “The carbon nanotubes don’t conduct electricity as

well as metal, which means they have resistance. So what if we sent enough electricity down that wire while gathering it on a single point? That would be more powerful than a nuclear weapon.”

The others were left speechless.

Things at this scale had that effect on people. Ordinary phenomena could achieve unbelievable results. Just like black holes were nothing more than ordinary gravity, yet they swallowed up even light and distorted both time and space.

“But how are you going to prepare and gather that much electricity?” Louisiana smiled. “Your work with the military must have told you how strong the fiber structure of that wire is. You just proved for us all that your plastic explosives are not enough to damage it.”

“This had to be the biggest obstacle you faced when building Mother Lady, so you should know better than any of us just how few places you can construct a space elevator.” Quenser spoke a direct challenge to the genius scientist smiling with the cracked desert of the Turkana District behind her. “1. It must be near the equator. 2. Building a ground base provides greater stability than trying to build it out at sea. Dealing with the shaking of the wires can be handled from the space station. 3. It must be somewhere without any typhoons or hurricanes despite the unstable weather so common on the equator. Because special though their structure might be, carbon nanotubes are still made of carbon and are thus weak to thunderclouds...in other words, to powerful static electricity.”

Electricity.

But he did not need to rely on a strange rain dance to summon some thunderclouds.

Electricity was created by the contact potential difference when two different types of matter came into contact and separated. One could be the wire and the other could be iron sand or even water. And shaking the wire more than it was ever designed for would increase the number of contacts.

“In other words,” said Quenser Barbotage with the voice of someone who desired an unchanged tomorrow and refused to let that cruel hammer strike the surface. “It’s the same as an electric eel. The basic idea might be a small thing, but that long wire increases the scale considerably!!”

All sound vanished.

The light was also blown away.

The distortion gathered at a point of slight damage at the 15km mark along the 100,000km wire and the carbon nanotube belt flashed. Heivia’s bullets and Louisiana’s fingers had shaken the wire up in space, but this was different. By calculating things out down here, they could create more energy than it could handle.

The instant the carbon nanotube wire snapped, a strange light appeared from the damage to the wire. But instead of electricity, that was the heat produced within the wire. So the light lasted more than an instant. The pure white shine did not vanish and instead grew endlessly as it tore through the wire capable of surviving in the thermosphere.

They should have been sufficiently far away, but Quenser nearly fell from the top of the spear. In fact, he could not remain on his feet and was crushed to the floor.

“Gahhh, ah!?”

He heard a disconcerting straining sound from within his body, but he still moved his head to check on the blue sky.

He saw a fireball there.

But it was not alone. An artificial downpour trailed by orange light fell from above. It was a terrifying image, but the light was not the pure white of welding he had seen before. The Object had clearly broken apart, lost its falling speed, and cooled.

“A meteor shower, huh?” said Louisiana as she looked up into the oddly clear sky.

They did not all hit at once. Tens of thousands of pieces continually poured down to the surface.

“Do you read many online news articles? They say 100,000 meteors poured down on the Eastern European city of Pultusk in 1868 and on the Eastern European city of Mocs in 1882. And 14,000 meteors fell on North America’s Arizona in 1912. Yet humanity was not destroyed. That is because those were not individual meteors that broke through the thermosphere; they were the many fragments of a single meteor that broke up in the atmosphere. And that distributed the force.”

There was a precedent.

If the great mass broke up in midair, it would not bring about an ice age. Humanity could live on for now. It also helped that this was the middle of the desert and not a major city center.

The snapped wire fluttered in the air like a ribbon.

They had won.

Or so Quenser thought until a singsong voice reached his ear. A certain girl leaned against the railing and slowly removed the gasmask covering her face.

The genius was thinly smiling with the orange rain falling behind her.

“That settles it then. Human goodwill has snuffed out this world’s final hope.”

“...?”

What is she talking about? wondered Quenser while still down on the floor.

She did not have some secret card left up her sleeve. She was not still hiding something.

“You mean...you weren’t trying to create a uniform global environment?”

“When did I ever say I was?”

The enigmatic genius girl tossed her mask aside.

Having accepted this result, she looked somehow sad as she continued her song.

“Objects weigh 200,000 tons. And there isn’t just the one. This world is crawling with them. Those extraordinary monsters are performing MMA-style footwork and firing low-stability plasma cannons, railguns, and other weapons capable of punching through other nuke-resistant Objects. All while forcibly suppressing all of the direct recoil, secondary heat, and shockwaves.”

He did not understand what she meant at first.

Or was a part of him refusing to understand it?

Louisiana gave him a pitying look while he lay on the ground at her feet.

“Did you really think that would have no effect on the planet’s ground and crust? When even those obsolete nuclear tests would cause artificial earthquakes? The planet’s axis has long since begun to shift. At this rate, humanity will be destroyed by a series of cataclysmic events. Or the climate itself will change to the point that we can no longer produce enough food. This will bring about the age of winter you so feared.”

She had insisted she was saving the world.

She had said she would protect the people of the Turkana District as they worked to preserve their simple way of life and she had said the rest of humanity was just a bonus prize.

Quenser finally saw what it was that genius scientist had seen.

“So I intended to hold a concert with that 100,000km string instrument to retune the planet’s axis.”

She sang.

The song of doom continued without end.

“And once that failed, I tried to drop the Object along a rough calculation I hoped would slam the planet back onto its proper axis. ...Of course, using the Object’s fall was an adlib meant to recover from an unexpected defeat, so it only had about a 20% chance of working. Ha ha. My actual plan had failed from the moment I could no longer play that instrument.”

“Wait...” Quenser clenched his teeth and forced out the words. “You said a giant meteor could not actually wipe out the dinosaurs, didn’t you? Did you think you could protect that village even as you dropped the Object on the Turkana District? Did you use that spiraling path around the elevator so you could have the elevator itself act as a shield for the village???”

She smiled.

But this smile was different. It was like she had been freed from a long, long period of isolation only to realize it was too late.

“But even that possibility is gone now.”

The Mother Lady space elevator’s wire had snapped. The others running parallel to it would not have escaped unharmed, so it was uncertain if they could survive her concert. And her last ditch effort using her own Object had also literally fallen apart. Even if she did try to repair the elevator that had fallen under the Legitimacy Kingdom’s control, would the hardheaded officials really comprehend the threat? And even if she could repair it as quickly as possible, would the earth survive long enough?

“My struggles end here. The world’s final chance at salvation has been fully snuffed out. But it means a lot that I managed to share the threat with you. Because you carry a different sort of talent from my own.”

“...”

“You may be able to destroy this world’s fundamental flaw.”

She must have carefully calculated it all out.

And that must have led her to the conclusion that she had to sacrifice her own Federation of Elevator Industries for her goal or she would run out of time.

Yet it had ended in failure.

The genius scientist spread her arms as if to receive the blessing of the ruinous rain pouring down from the sky.

“Hello, god of destruction. Show me how you will smash this godforsaken problem to smithereens.”

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