

Chapter 1: Which is More Frightening: Shells or Overwork? >> Tank-Accompanied Battle in the Mekong District

Part 1

It was October.

The continent of Asia had a wide variety of regions and climates, from landlocked deserts to the oceanic Island Nation, but in the southern sea near the equator, the weather was still quite hot in this season. The unique humidity of Asia trapped that heat around you and the smell of the rotting trees and mud of the thick subtropical forest brewed a unique kind of "air".

The two idiots named Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell had just infiltrated the Mekong District and completed a job there, so they and the other soldiers gave a look of annoyance at the beach where the clear water was washing in and out.

"...That was supposed to be our extraction point, wasn't it?"

"Oh, hell. We spent five days without a single bath while we snuck through mangroves and blew away white powder processing plants, so what's with the festivities here? Are they planning a parade for the triumphant return of Heivia the super handsome genius noble?"

They were on their way back from blowing up some old-style heroin factories that had started popping up all over the map, presumably because their market share was being threatened by the synthetic drugs that had become all the rage lately. This could get a little complicated, but poppy seeds produced opium, the primary component of opium was morphine, and morphine became heroin with some chemical processing. This will not be on the test, but it is all very dangerous, so pay careful attention. Anyway, they had gotten as far as blowing up the drug factories (which were rumored to have military connections) and returned.

A transport helicopter was meant to pick them up here so they could return to the warship out at sea.

But they found something enormous there instead.

It was a battlecruiser of unknown affiliation.

It had been beached.

It was located entirely up on the white sand.

The mass of metal was more than 200 meters long and painted a faintly bluish gray. Three-gun sets of main cannons were stacked in tiers and the large ship's bridge towered up a bit toward the right. That said, the real firepower was in the vertical missile launcher tubes lined up along the stern of the ship. There were also Gatling guns and torpedo tubes arranged along either side like roadside trees.

"What do we do? Return to the hidden base in the forest?"

"When survivors from the heroin factories could still be wandering around out there? If we flee there and give away the position of all the secret facilities, we'd be putting our allies' lives at risk."

They then received an appreciated transmission from Her Excellency Frolaytia Capistrano, their

busty, silver-haired commander who was monitoring the situation via satellite.

“Quenser, Heivia. Change of plans.”

“What in the world is going on?”

“The start of fall is apparently the season for cyclones in Asia. You had trouble with that yesterday, if you recall. Well, an Information Alliance warship was beached by the storm. We’ve picked up their rescue signal out here at sea. Sorry about making you work again after your all-nighter, but could you start on some philanthropic work?”

“What!? You want us to help them!? Not kill them!?”

“There are international rules unrelated to war concerning shipwrecks. You’ve heard about another world power’s submarine working to rescue the crew of a ship sunk in an accident, haven’t you? If enemy and ally work together to save them, it apparently makes for a lovely story.”

“...If that thing gets back out to sea, it’s our asses it’ll be targeting.”

“The ship’s diesel engine and troop equipment are apparently still working, so if we attack them, it’s all you little foot soldiers that will be blown to bits. Are you sure you want that?”

A beached metal ship was a troublesome thing.

At sea, opening a single hole in its belly would sink it, but a much greater amount of firepower was needed to silence one on land.

“Of course, since we were ordered to help out instead of blowing it away with the Object, I can only assume there was some argument in the safe country council,” said Frolaytia. “Simply put, doing this favor here will let us withdraw from a war on the other side of the globe. This is another form of war. A great age of life and peace is counting on this. If you screw it up, that diplomatic card will fail and the councilors will be less than happy with us, so make sure you do this right.”

The two idiots stared at the radio for a while after the transmission ended. Once it was clear there was no changing this, they covered their faces with their hands.

“We don’t even get a chance to take a shower...?”

“Do you really think Miss Sadist would agree to that? She’d just say we already got one when that cyclone dumped rain on our heads all night long, so let’s get this over with so we can return to the fleet.”

And with that, the mission had begun.

The Information Alliance battlecruiser was more than 200 meters long and appeared to weigh about 70 thousand tons. They could not exactly tow it with a truck’s winch and they could not line up logs to roll it forward either. Neither were bad ideas for moving something big and heavy, but this was just too big and heavy.

“Welcome to Hotel Flagship 019!”

Someone approached them across the unnaturally white beach.

The old man seemed awfully cheerful for someone who had been shipwrecked and forced to get help

from another world power. Because he worked on a ship, he wore a white uniform that did not even try to use camouflage and he was accompanied by several bodyguards. And all of those bodyguards were young women in pure white sailor uniforms. ...The uniforms should not have been a problem for navy soldiers, so why did it look out of place on those sexy women?

The man who inspired thoughts of "death to the bourgeoisie" introduced himself.

"I am Alfred Silverking, captain of the Flagship 019. It would seem human race is practically brimming with good will. I truly appreciate this rescue."

"We'll help out, but we're not about to enter under your command. So we're not gonna change our language or our manners."

"Perfectly understandable." The gray-haired old man pulled out a thick pipe and one of his female bodyguards lit it with practiced hand. "Some of your people arrived from sea earlier and are already working, but, well, we are the ones in need. If you have any questions, feel free to ask."

"...Why do you insist on speaking down to us, old man?"

"That is just how I am. Now, our objective is to return the ship to sea as quickly as possible, but a 70-thousand-ton ship will not be easily budged."

"Tie it to an Object and tow it on out to sea, idiot."

"The ship would tear in half. Sand has friction too, you see."

The old man explained the situation to the idiot duo and their jolly friends. As they trudged through the sand on their way toward the Flagship 019, he groped the butt of one of his bodyguards while showing no sign he thought he was doing anything wrong.

"Luckily, my ship is not simply a giant hunk of metal. It has a large empty space within. And I have not received any word of a hole being torn in the hull when it was beached. So it would be best to return to the basics. Ships are built in shipyards on the land, but they are sent out to sea once they are completed. Now, how do they do that?"

Quenser frowned at that.

"...Fill the area below them with water?"

"Precisely. Luckily, there is only fine sand below my ship. That can be dug out if we put our minds to it. First, we must support it with pillars on both sides so it does not topple over. Yes, there must be more than 100 on either side to ensure the weight is not focused on a single point. Then we use heavy machinery to dig out the sand below the ship, create a large enough space, and guide seawater into that space. That will get my Flagship 019 afloat once more and it can be returned to the sea."

"Wait, wait, wait!! Wait!! You make it sound easy, but that's gotta mean digging out a hell of a lot of sand! Not only do we need a space below the ship, but we need a route out to sea so it doesn't scrape its belly on the way. Are you asking us to build a canal here!?"

"Didn't I tell you? I truly appreciate this rescue."

The gray-haired dirty old man was entirely nonchalant about it.

Before proposing an idea, Quenser thanked god that his commander was a busty, silver-haired beauty.

“Really though, if we have the Baby Magnum drag around a wire-attached bucket like it’s trolling for fish, it can dig up the seabed and create a route out to sea pretty easily. The real problem is the beach where something so inexact wouldn’t work.”

“Stop working your brain for this piece of shit, Quenser. We’re not the Capitalist Corporations, so don’t turn into a goddamn wage slave.”

A makeshift barricade was crudely placed around the beach and Legitimacy Kingdom work vehicles were already driving around within it. Instead of cranes or diggers, they looked more like armored vehicles and tanks with those parts added on.

Heivia gave an annoyed look to the Holy Sword: Shitty Shovel he had pulled out of the beach.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. Our military still hasn’t automated this kind of thing?”

“Weapons always have a manual step, so they never fully hand over control. A machine can’t be legally responsible for its actions, so whoever’s in charge would get in trouble even if it’s all automated.”

“But tankers and cruise ships are automated to cut down on labor costs. And the navy isn’t much different. Not to mention spy drones and bombers. If the sea and sky are going the unmanned route, why is the land alone so untouchable?”

But Quenser was interested in something other than their diligent allies.

Something thicker than a firehose descended from the battlecruiser’s deck to the beach and then continued on past the barricade.

The student stared curiously up the 9 meters to the deck and asked about it.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, that. The ship’s diesel engine has better fuel efficiency when it is kept on at all times instead of switching it on and off for every little thing. But that would be a waste of energy, so we are sending the engine’s excess power to a local village. So soon after a cyclone, they are very thankful that they can make breakfast without waiting for the torn power lines to be repaired.”

“...I seriously doubt the black-hearted military would perform volunteer work if they weren’t getting anything out of it.”

“Do not be ridiculous. We are a peace-keeping force established for the purpose of self-defense.” Alfred was saying some unbelievable things. “But to be honest, we wanted to avoid a strained post-disaster environment where the people might relieve their stress by blaming their unexpected guests. We are giving them a treat to ensure our work goes smoothly. Oppressing people with military might is not the only way to cut down on terrorism.”

...The crude barricades which left a lot of openings were apparently part of creating that image. If they strictly kept everyone out of the area, the locals might see it as outsiders occupying their land. Quenser had heard that safe country factories would leave a portion of their walls transparent to allow people to see inside. This probably had a similar psychological effect.

"It's a metal whale!"

"Hey, can we take a picture of it?"

"Won't the metal whale dry out if they don't pour water on it?"

The place was already popular with the local kids. This really showed the Information Alliance's ability to control people's minds.

Alfred Silverking waved past the barricade with the perfect smile for a press conference.

"I am sorry you have to work on this so soon after your previous job," he said to Quenser and Heivia.

"I'd like to complain, but I'd be revealing military secrets if I did..."

"Are you referring to the heroin factories in Mekong? We have been monitoring that. Oh, that poor Faith Organization film industry. They might be the world power most lagging behind when it comes to guiding international public opinion, but once you start relying on dirty money to pay for more CG, you really are beyond saving as an entertainment industry."

"It doesn't matter if you know everything about it already! We still can't say anything, dammit!!"

Meanwhile, that captain, who was old in every way but his sex drive, received a whispered message from one of his young female bodyguards in sailor uniforms. He removed the thick pipe from his mouth and instead took a radio from the woman's smooth hand.

"This is Alfred Silverking."

"Commodore, surely you know what it means when you're receiving a call from someone sent here as a troubleshooter. I apologize for how sudden this is, but we have a problem. Immediately put together a unit for a land-based mission. Quality: a specialization in covert activity. Quantity: even just a platoon would be enough. And give priority to the quality requirement."

"My ship is part of the navy, you know? Do you know where I could find a witch's potion to give legs to a mermaid?"

"Is this inept resistance of yours in the middle of an emergency your idea of following the Information Alliance way of life and getting information out of me for free, commodore? That is a shocking level of idiocy, but if you like the idea of being hanged for violating international law, then by all means continue wasting my time. You are the responsible party here."

"...To be entirely honest, I do not know where I can find such a unit. Do you know the animal that kills the most people in the world? The mosquito. They carry a great many pathogens and kill more than 700 thousand people a year. That is more than crime or war. I apologize for going on and on about this, but none of my soldiers have been vaccinated for malaria or the other diseases found in the Asian jungle."

"The two sides are working together since you're shipwrecked, right? If necessary, you can procure some Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. Just hurry."

"How?"

"The truth is the greatest trump card. Tell them every last one of them will be slaughtered if they get caught up in our problem. Tell them the neighbor's house is on fire and the direction of the wind

isn't looking good."

The transmission ended.

The two idiots had a very bad feeling where this was headed.

Then the gray-haired dirty old man turned toward them, grinned, and made a suggestion.

"Now then, gentlemen. Which would you prefer: digging out sand with a shovel, or returning to a storm of gunfire on the battlefield?"

Since he was not silver-haired, busty, or beautiful, Heivia reflexively grabbed at the man, so the young female bodyguards in white sailor uniforms knocked him to the ground and thoroughly rewarded him.

Part 2

Outdoor work in Southeast Asia felt like being steamed in an oven to healthily cut out the fat, but Quenser and Heivia were instead guided inside the Flagship 019 battlecruiser.

They parted ways with Alfred Silverking and a young male soldier showed them the rest of the way.

They found a space that seemed far too large for a battlecruiser. It seemed more like a crude ship's hold from a helicopter carrier or a landing ship. A parasol, a simple table, and some chairs were set up and a girl of about 12 with long blonde hair was enjoying some tea with her legs crossed.

She wore a black military uniform that clearly identified her as not your average soldier and she moved just her eyes to look at them.

"Welcome, gentlemen."

"...Is everyone in the Information Alliance a wannabe S who insists on looking down on people?"

"Heivia, you can't expect much from these morons. Just be glad we traded that gray-haired old man for a cute girl..."

"Hah hah hah? A cute girl? A cute girl!? Oh, Quenser. Even if I'm being generous, we're either looking at the investiture for some snot-nosed noble brat or the Island Nation's Shichi-Go-San festival. This tiny, low-and-inside dead ball is clearly categorized as a little gir- bgwehohhhh!!!!???"

He cut himself off with some odd noises because of the teacup full of piping hot tea that the black-uniformed grim reaper had chucked at him without batting an eye. It seemed being stomped on by the skirt-wearing women who had been hand-picked by that dirty old man had not been enough of a reward for this boy. Had he completely forgotten they were inside an enemy warship?

"Now. This high-ranking officer with a sexy and adult body will deign to ignore your adorably nonsensical statement."

With her legs still crossed, the blonde girl held another cup out toward the empty air. A butler-like young man poured her some new tea. Without even looking in his direction, the little girl...no, the girl...no, no, the beautiful woman...no, no, no, the super sexy widow...no, no, no, no, there is simply no getting around the fact that she was a Rank AAA little girl. And she gestured toward the other seats with her chin.

She seemed to be telling them to take a seat.

"I am Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. I specialize in troubleshooting for the Information Alliance military. I don't know if it is meant as a compliment or an insult, but I am known as the Stopgap Grim Reaper. I honestly would rather not have anything to do with you for long, but let's try to work together for the time being."

"We're...wait, can we give our names, Heivia?"

"You just gave mine! Th-then again, giving our name and rank shouldn't be a problem."

Wraith sighed lightly at their exchange.

"Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage and Private First Class Heivia Winchell."

"Uhh?"

"You have a thing for feet and you have a thing for armpits."

"Uhhh!?"

"Don't let this surprise you, you innocent fools. We are the Information Alliance."

The blonde girl provided an explanation that may or may not have had further implications.

Now that their fetishes had been exposed, Quenser and Heivia nervously took their seats as if a giant power saw had been moved up between their legs and stopped just before reaching their balls.

"So, um, what would you like to discuss?"

"I am glad to see you catch on quickly, in your own idiotic way. Sincerity is a virtue. You may have already heard from the commodore, but we have a problem. However, we do not have the ability to deal with it since we are beached here. Since you have crossed the battle line to rescue us, we are all in this together, so I will have the Legitimacy Kingdom assist in resolving this problem."

The young man waiting behind her lined up a few paper documents on the table as if handing out restaurant menus. They may have used paper instead of a digital format because there was no way of fully erasing digital data.

In what may have been a habit of hers, Wraith needlessly spun a pen in her hand.

"The Information Alliance and Legitimacy Kingdom are currently working together because a beached ship is deemed 'sunk' and unable to operate according to the military regulations and leaving the 205 crewmembers with no ability to fight back would mean letting them die. A truly beautiful farce, don't you think?"

"That just means you're asking us to help because you can't fight, right? What about it?"

Wraith sighed at Quenser's question.

"...What if we secretly did have the ability to fight on land?"

"Huh?"

Heivia frowned at that ominous suggestion.

“As I said, I was sent in after the fact as a troubleshooter.” The blonde girl looked annoyed. “So I will admit it took me too long to grasp the situation. ...Curse the Flagship 019. The warship was carrying five tanks in its belly. I don’t want to protect that dirty old man and his crew, but this is more like a leaked report than an intentional cover-up.”

“Why would a naval ship have tanks...?”

“I don’t know either. Maybe they didn’t want to transport them through the usual routes, or maybe they were on some covert operation that precluded having the Tank 041s show up in the records.”

It was a strange thing, but Quenser and the others were inside an unusually large space within an otherwise cramped warship. What was that space?

It was possible the Flagship 019 was more than just a warship sent out as a naval fighting force. It may have also transported armaments.

“I really don’t like where this is headed. This unlicensed taxi definitely wasn’t headed to a hotel, I can tell you that...”

“Oh, one other thing, my dear idiots. Sorry, but you will have to take this information to your graves.”

“Hold on!! You forgot to ask us if we wanted to hear about it first! Don’t stab us and then apologize!!”

“Yes, but we are the Information Alliance, you see.”

“Curse her... She opened the drawer and then slammed it back shut so we can’t turn back!!”

“As wise and merciful as I am, I will guarantee your silly human rights. Thus, you are free to turn back here, but if you do that, keep in mind that someone outside my jurisdiction will likely add your names to some assassination list or another.”

The two idiots’ eyes bugged out at that, but they were already in the middle of a secret operation. If they said anything they should not, they could easily end up the target of a cross-borders payback operation.

“To get back on topic, the problem is that we have a fighting force capable of moving on the land.” Wraith nonchalantly sipped at her tea. “The request for cooperative rescue work only works in a pressing situation, such as a small submersible being sent to help a sunk submarine where the crew is simply waiting for death as the oxygen runs out. If we have a usable fighting force at our disposal, that condition no longer applies.”

...Of course, there was no way that five tanks could get a 200 meter and 70 thousand ton mass back to the ocean, but that did not really matter. The people back in safe countries who were cramming their noses in the rulebooks tended not to care about the actual on-site situation.

“If our temporary cooperation is abandoned here, the Information Alliance’s Flagship 019 will be blown away by an Object with no way of fighting back. But the Flagship 019’s guns still work. Plus, all those diligent Legitimacy Kingdom pigs are hanging around at point-blank range. If a battle breaks out, both sides will be wiped out before they can escape back to sea. No, in the worst case,

your Object's main cannon could even blow away your own infantry as they flee along the beach."

"Ugh..."

"...I-I can see that happening. With that violent princess and busty commander in the same deck, anything can happen."

"I would prefer to avoid a silly battle as well. Calculating out the scope of the damage would be a pain. So I want you to move the five troublesome tanks elsewhere as soon as possible. Yes, I can see it now. The first report on the morning news will be some of that oddly tall and narrow 'viewer-supplied footage' that has become so ubiquitous. I expect it would take two hours before any actual reporters with a press badge hanging from their neck arrive on the scene. Make sure you have this done before then."

Quenser and Heivia understood what she was trying to say.

They might have been fine with helping the Information Alliance with this, but not here and now. They had just finished destroying heroin factories deep in the subtropical forest, so they were not about to start another battle now. If you accepted a cruel convenience store manager's harsh timetable even once, that would become the norm from then on. They knew for sure their sadistic and busty commander would do that. There was no way they would accept to go on a likely literal death march for the war industry.

And something else bothered them more.

"But doesn't everyone have some kind of camera these days? Just one person with a cellphone can send that tall and narrow footage to the entire world."

"We are the Information Alliance. We can suppress amateur witness information, even if they use a civilian satellite service. We can shout fake news or fabricate evidence about the footage having traces of being doctored. If it comes down to it, we can even hit ourselves with a cyber-attack. We create our extreme explanation to compete with theirs. If it comes down to a futile argument between white and black, the people's judgments will fall into the neutral gray zone in the middle. We can hold it back as long as we are not talking about that media that comes with the title of 'mass', which is far more persuasive."

There was no need to overthink this.

They only had to fire up the five tanks and get them out of here.

Quenser and Heivia only had to act as guards along the way.

"You will find the remnants of an airport 120 kilometers north of here. It used to be an Information Alliance airfield, but we had to abandon it after the Faith Organization demonstrated the advantages of their way of fighting properly and killing diligently. Just get those troublesome tanks to the bunker there. Once things have stabilized, the Information Alliance will put together an operation to recover them."

"Does that mean what I think it does...?"

"Yes, you would be aware after crawling around the forest destroying those heroin factories. This is a battlefield country, but it is effectively under Faith Organization control. South Asia is a melting pot of Hinduism and Buddhism. And it would be a problem if they destroyed or captured the tanks in

transit, since that material evidence could be used as a diplomatic card against us.”

In addition to simple terrain and weather information, the documents lined up on the table listed a few expected enemies and their equipment.

The threats to the Tank 041s were shoulder-fired rockets, anti-tank mines, anti-tank trenches, IEDs made from unexploded ordnance, barbed wire, tanks, attack helicopters, and...

“We would like to demonstrate some Information Alliance-style respect by relying on the data that is your experience in ‘surviving’ such things.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

“The Faith Organization’s Second Generation Coilgun 073 is patrolling at irregular intervals. Oh, and your silly codename for it is the Paper Bikini, I believe. ...We would prefer to avoid walking through that area, but we have no time. Find a way.”

“...”

“...”

The two boys fell silent when the memories came flooding back.

Yet it normally seemed like those two idiots would suffocate if they were not constantly talking.

In a way, this was a nightmare on the level of entering a tiger den, snatching up the tiger cub, safely escaping the forest, and celebrating that you would never have to face a monster like that again, just to remember that you had dropped the car keys in the depths of that cave.

However, the clock was already ticking.

If they did nothing, the fuse would burn down and they would be caught in the explosion.

They were stuck between a hellish rock and a hellish hard place.

The only choice with the slightest chance of avoiding bloodshed was to move forward.

“I have one last question,” asked Quenser.

“What might that be?”

“...Has our big boss, Frolaytia, agreed to this joint operation?”

When he hesitantly asked, Wraith Martini Vermouthspray elegantly returned her teacup to the saucer.

Then she crossed her slender index fingers in front of her adorable lips.

While forming a small X in front of her mouth, the blonde girl gave him a somewhat upturned glance and asked for something unbelievable.

“This will just have to be our little secret.”

Part 3

And after all that...

"This is the worst," someone groaned. "We only have two options here: die from a bullet or die from overwork..."

They were in a thick forest, but there was no solid ground below their feet. In fact, the seawater rose about halfway up their calves. This area was known as a mangrove. That meant it had worse footing than a normal forest, it was extremely hot and humid, and they could not even sit down to take a break.

Long ago, people had built cells that entirely ignored the captive's human rights. The water cell had submerged the floor so the captive could not lie down and sleep while the Sisyphian cell had forced the captive to walk endlessly around and around in the small space by passing a long stick through the bars and prodding them whenever they stopped moving. Those nightmarish rooms had destroyed the captive's mind through physical exhaustion, but marching through a mangrove without any rest was quickly reaching that level.

It was hellishly hot and humid, but they were surrounded by non-potable seawater. And even if they got desperate enough to try to cool off in the water, the osmotic pressure would still wear them out on the cellular level. This was the environment through which five masses of steel moved slowly in a line. It was an incredibly difficult route that kept switching between land and waterside, but the tanks managed to remain exactly the same distance apart.

Tropical mangroves were the perfect fit for the effects of global warming, so they seemed to have been taking over the landscape quite quickly. The greenery had swallowed up fighter jets, transport helicopters, and the like which had been shot down by an Object's lasers. They could feel their balls shrivel up when they thought about how many small shrimps and crabs had to be living all through here.

"Are these those self-driving vehicles that are so popular lately?"

"Huh? Well, that does sound like something the Information Alliance would like."

The tanks were clearly maintaining a walking pace so that the infantry like Quenser and Heivia could be positioned around them as guards.

"What the hell is this? There's something wrong with placing flesh-and-blood guards around something with composite armor over a meter thick. What are we, a meat cushion used to protect that metal fruit?"

"I'd rather be here than out front. The ones who lost that game of rock-paper-scissors are taking the lead to make sure the tanks don't trigger any tripwires or landmines, right?"

"So how far have landmines evolved these days, anyway?"

"I dunno. I've heard a lot of stories though. Like landmines that fly up into the air and fall right on top of the tank, or landmines that inform a remote operator when triggered and that operator uses video footage to confirm the presence of enemy soldiers before detonating it."

"What happened to landmines being something buried in the ground...?"

"There are apparently also landmines that have something like a parabolic antenna on the ground which automatically turns its head to target the side of the tank. Just like a concave mirror, it

focuses the blast on a single point to launch the blast like a spear and pierce the armor from dozens of meters away.”

The weight settings for an anti-personnel mine and an anti-tank mine were different, so they would not explode if a person accidentally stepped on them. ...But to reiterate, this was a mangrove with seawater covering everything. Even at a depth of a few dozen centimeters, the water pressure could add enough for a person’s weight to trigger them. And if the mine was made from glass or plastic, the metal detectors attached to the end of their rifles could not locate them, so they had to be super careful.

“Have we wandered into a post-apocalyptic world? The greenery has swallowed up all these weapons...”

“It only takes a few years for this to happen. That goddamn Oceanian forestation tech seems to have been profitable. Although that dictator said he couldn’t trust some words on paper, so he didn’t sell them the Object tech along with it.”

Unlike direct sunlight, this was the same stuffy heat as a plastic greenhouse. Heivia was completely sick of it and wiped away the sweat dripping down his chin.

“We’re doing our jobs and protecting the battalion from a threat, but our busty commander is never gonna see it that way. Will she just think we’re skipping out on our sand-digging job?”

“The focus right now is on preventing this information from leaking out, but we’ll just have to hope that little Wraithy will explain everything once this is over.”

And since the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance were working together at the moment, this would not qualify as disobeying orders and deserting...or so the two idiots hoped.

The tanks in question - the Information Alliance seemed to call them Tank 041s - had been hastily painted with Legitimacy Kingdom-ish camouflage, but anyone who knew what they were doing would quickly notice something was wrong. The tanks did not look like a crude collection of straight lines. The body and rotating turret had streamlined curves that flowed front to back and it was designed to stay low to the ground. It made Quenser think of a sports car or the front car of a high-speed train.

They had to get those tanks to the remains of some airfield.

He made a comment while glancing over at the tank which was covered with small boxes about the size of a phonebook.

“I guess not even a tank can just knock down all the trees in its path.”

He received a clear voice transmission from the tank right next to him.

“Even if they’re masses of composite armor, they still weigh a few dozen tons each. It would probably be simplest to think of them like giant trucks. They smash through concrete walls in movies, but they can actually be stopped pretty easily. And when you do have to force your way through a barrier, you need to point the gun backwards so it doesn’t get damaged.”

“Who are you?”

“Oops, I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Dorothea Martini Naked. Nice to meetcha☐☐”

The two idiots exchanged a glance.

"...Martini?"

"We've heard that name before."

"Yeah, we're...y'know, a part of that standard. The Martini Series," said the voice. "Although I don't recommend looking into that too much."

This sudden operation existed outside normal operating procedures and it seemed to have some hidden connections to things they were not aware of. To sum it up, they had nothing but bad feelings about this.

"(Umm, have we been set up in some way?)"

"(That's just how the military works. You're either tricked by the enemy or caught in some conspiracy by an ally. It can come from the front or the back, but you get fucked either way.)"

Diesel exhaust filled their lungs along with the salty and muddy scent while Quenser and Heivia felt less than hopeful about the fate of the derailed train that was this mission.

Even the radios they carried felt different.

They had left their Legitimacy Kingdom format radios and handheld devices at the Disaster Rescue Base on the beach, and they had been given Information Alliance format ones instead. Everyone's cute Wraithy claimed it was a way to prevent an intelligence leak, but everything looked suspicious once you entered that mindset.

Dorothea did not seem to mind.

"Man, it's been a while since I worked in a group. It's kind of exciting. And if I'm enjoying this, I guess I'm still not a true shut-in. Thank goodness I'm normal!"

"Yeah, I'm sure it is enjoyable when the tank drives itself. Can't you at least let us ride on top?"

"Every surface is covered in reactive armor to make sure an affordable \$69.99-a-pop rocket can't blow away a \$9 million tank, so that would be a lot like sitting on top of a pile of anti-personnel mines. Ours are so sensitive they'd probably go off, but feel free to try."

"Eeeeeek!?"

"Hm? Wait, it's been a while??? Aren't tanks run by groups of four or five?"

Dorothea answered Quenser's question by waving the tank's gun back and forth.

"That's definitely been the tradition since tanks first appeared on the battlefield and those traditions are hard to break, but these days you can take everything from the driving to the firing control and concentrate it down to a single panel if you use a fiber-optic drive-by-light system. Even normal cars are going to be self-driving before long. It's true you need some manpower when they break down or get stuck in the mud, but you can deal with that by keeping a movement-assistance suit or work robot onboard."

There was a hemispherical multi-purpose camera the size of a basketball on top of the turret and there were small and narrow lenses on all sides of the tank, so a single person could control

everything.

“Then why do we still use four people in each tank?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know what paradigm the Legitimacy Kingdom uses, but it might be a loneliness countermeasure. Being stuck in a metal coffin on the front line for long periods can be pretty taxing. So making sure there are several people in each one can mean a lot. Of course, here in the Information Alliance, we use a radio or infrared network to chat with each other. Your way is a waste of labor expenses. Nyahoo, Trevor, Magienz, Energy, and Roxeus, my friends on lonely nights.”

More calls of “nyahoo” entered the radio, so that seemed to be some kind of minor slang. Those online people holed up in their metal coffins were far from quiet.

“...Are all of them Martinis?”

“Of course not. We’re not just a dime a dozen, you know? Nyahoo.”

That pointless exchange did not last long.

Whatever they did, they were stuck walking on and on. Plus, they did not have flat asphalt to walk on. They were inside a mangrove forest with a bumpy floor of roots flooded up to the calves with seawater.

Even if they paced themselves properly, they could only march about 40 kilometers in 10 hours. And these Legitimacy Kingdom scumbags would put in any amount of work toward getting out of doing work, so there was no way they were just going to keep going like this.

“Hey, Quenser, it’s time to get creative! We can’t let them do this to us, can we!?”

“Not a chance. Okay, let’s grab some stuff from that moss-covered fighter. Its low-pressure tires are still intact. Then we’ll borrow the winch wire from that transport helicopter.”

“What about the crucial cart?”

“Won’t that broken main wing work?”

They could not ride on the tanks since their reactive armor was not much different from anti-personnel mines, but that just meant they needed to build a wheeled sled and have it pulled by a wire.

“Why are you two working up a sweat just to skip out on work?” asked Dorothea.

“I’m willing to do anything if it means taking it easy. Okay, Dorothea. You’re our cosplay reindeer crawling on all fours, so drag around this cruel Santa’s sleigh while we mercilessly whip you.”

That changed the nature of their journey.

If they ignored the diesel exhaust in the face and seawater raining down on them due to the lack of a mudguard on the treads, it was not that bad a ride. And it was sure to shorten the travel time. They wanted to finish this before the day was out.

“Yeehaw! Go, go! Whip, whip! Wah hah hah!!”

“...A-are they tormenting my butt in their imagination just from looking at the back of the tank? They don’t even know what I look like yet...”

Just then, something changed.

The deep roar of the powerful diesel engine suddenly stopped. But even if it had stopped moving, the tank’s flame had not gone out. It was for emergency use and only lasted about half an hour, but it had a fully electric mode. The idiots had not thought to add a brake to their cart, so they very nearly crashed face-first into the back of the tank. It sounded silly, but they very nearly blew themselves to kingdom come.

Also, all the chatter on the radio had suddenly vanished.

Something slowly filled their vision within a silence so great that the chirp of a bird was enough to make their hearts pound.

The giant mass was over 50 meters tall.

It was the Faith Organization Second Generation Paper Bikini.

Heivia just about rejected the truth before his eyes by taking off running, but Quenser grabbed him, got down from the cart, and moved right up next to the closest tank.

“(We’ll be killed! These metal coffins are useless against an Object!! They’re nothing but giant metal readings. Once it notices them, we’ll be blown to bits!!)”

“(Quiet down, Heivia!)”

“(We need to escape into the forest!! If we’re gonna try to wait it out, we’re best off far away from any metal readings! That fighter and transport helicopter in the forest were put there by that thing’s lasers, right!?)”

“(Are you stupid? How far do you think we’ve traveled already!?)”

It did not seem the Object had a clear lock on them. It was slowly moving from right to left at a few kilometers away, but that was nothing to something the size of an Object. Dorothea Martini Naked had said the tanks could not knock over the surrounding trees, but that thing could likely plow right through the mangrove with no issue whatsoever.

It was the Paper Bikini.

It had a unique silhouette with the 50m spherical main body contained between diamond-shaped air cushion floats that looked like diagonally-flattened rectangles. It had a main cannon on either side, but they were not aimed forward. The ridiculously-huge coilguns covered the 180 degrees to the left and right.

Instead, it had two thick pieces of shield armor on the front.

Quenser groaned a quiet comment as he recalled what each part did.

“(The front is only used for charging forward. That Second Generation breaks through the barricades to move deep inside enemy territory before spraying gigantic shells everywhere.)”

“(That thing takes mobile weapon tactics back to the First World War. But it’s managed to use that

to survive in this harsh age, so you can't really criticize it either. You can't exactly call those old methods smart, but if we're caught, we aren't going to get a pleasant death.)"

However, its most defining trait was not its shape or tactics. That would be the material used to make it: paper.

That might be hard to believe, so let's say it again: paper.

Objects were usually colossal masses of metal, but the Paper Bikini had been designed out of paper. In ancient times, a powerful Asian empire had used phonebook-thick bundles of paper to make armor. This was likely a similar concept.

It was the ultimate form of the shock-absorption and dispersion found in bulletproof jackets made from aramid fiber, glass fiber, or spider silk. The main cannon was a coilgun created by placing lots of electromagnets inside a cylinder given sufficient strength by combining hundreds or thousands of bulletproof papers. Even the shells were 750kg masses hardened with a special adhesive and given a pointed tip for a cone shape.

A single idea could change paper's durability and other traits. For a close-to-home example, cardboard had caused something of a revolution. Similarly, the Paper Bikini was attempting to overturn the standard tactics by using a multi-lattice structure that was also being researched for the folding of tiny carbon nanotubes.

In the previous battles, the Princess had torn away the Paper Bikini's armor a few times.

And yet here it was good as new.

It had an overwhelming advantage when it came to the cost per gram of armor. Melting down paper and remaking it was a lot more efficient than melting down scrap metal and reusing it. So as long as its reactor was not destroyed, it could replace its armor and return for a rematch. In addition to its simple combat specs, it placed financial pressure on its opponent as an economic strategy designed for the coming Age of Starvation.

"(So it's a paper swimsuit that can never be removed, huh?)"

"(It pisses me off how that busty commander's naming sense is so damn good only when she can be so malicious.)"

The Faith Organization's official codename was Hariti.

Since that name came from Buddhism which taught reincarnation, it had likely been designed as an Object made from reusable parts. Standard Objects used steel mixed with a powerful heat-resistant and reactive material, but overuse of that could easily lead to wars fought over the iron ore itself. Once that happened, the technology to build more Objects from a replacement material - especially one that could be replenished in a few years instead of the thousands or tens of thousands of years required for petroleum or mineral resources - would become a trump card against the world. And that was a realistic value for a selectively-bred mangrove.

Also, international society watched for secret Object constructions by monitoring the iron ore trade. Since paper was not monitored, it could slip right past those watchful eyes. That was another way the material could appear quite attractive.

"(No, I can't take it anymore! If we stick with these old-fashioned tanks, we'll be turned into some

twisted piece of artwork along with all the melted metal! We need to go hide in the forest!!)”

“(Wait, that would work against us!! The Object’s thermal sensors don’t work with all the heat and humidity trapped in the mangrove. It’ll find readings of above 40 degrees everywhere, so it can’t detect human body heat!)”

“(What about the metal readings!? One look at the radar screen and we’re screwed!!)”

“(How many abandoned masses of metal do you think crashed here or were abandoned in the mud? Listen, stay here. Don’t even think about moving. It’ll overlook us if it thinks this is just a rusted hunk of metal.)”

“(So we just have to pray and hope for the best!? When we’re up against the Faith Organization!? Are you sure this isn’t their way of spreading their religion!?)”

“(It might have anti-personnel sensors, but it’s a Second Generation. If we stick by the tank, it won’t be able to tell us apart. When blowing up those heroin factories, twenty of us huddled together to create a rectangular mass it mistook for an abandoned vehicle, remember? Whereas if we run into the forest, the anti-personnel sensors will pick us up individually and it’ll grow suspicious. Then it’ll fire a shot ‘just in case’, blowing us all up in the process!)”

They could not use their radios to ask Dorothea and the others in the tanks why they had stopped, which only made their hearts pound all the harder. Quenser and Heivia had their idea, but Dorothea’s group might have a different one. If they screwed up their cooperation and the tanks suddenly started moving, the two idiots could easily get crushed by the treads.

They waited and waited as the sticky and rusty smell of steel and motor oil filled their lungs.

The beating of their own hearts was far too loud for their liking.

Their faces were soaked with sweat as they continued praying to some formless higher power.

And...

And...

And...

Finally, the Paper Bikini continued on to the left.

This action may have held no real significance for the Object.

The Paper Bikini, with its spherical main body held between diamond-shaped propulsion devices, had not noticed them, so it was simply continuing along an irregular patrol pattern that prevented anyone from predicting its course or timetable.

But to the puny humans clinging to the surface of the earth, it felt like the end of a herculean task. Even if their opponent had never even recognized them as an enemy.

They waited a lot longer to make sure that giant form had entirely vanished while restlessly moving its main cannons back and forth. Only then did a signal return to their close-range radios.

“Forward. Resume moving forward. We’re going to switch back to diesel, so move away, everyone. We do have anti-personnel radar to prevent that sort of thing, but the self-driving mode prioritizes

the terrain. Make sure the treads don't catch the bottom of your uniform."

"Y-you have got to be kidding," complained Heivia while wiping sweat from his brow. "How long do we have to keep playing this deadly game of Red Light, Green Light?"

Nevertheless, they seemed to have concluded that the threat had passed. The danger had shifted down to low gear, giving them a short interval to calm their body and mind before the next threat. Or so they assumed.

That was naïve.

A moment later, dry gunshots shot out from the depths of the mangrove.

Part 4

It was likely a short burst of fire from an assault rifle.

Since they fired without any kind of warning, it was likely the pilgrim soldiers of the Faith Organization who would patrol and proselytize simultaneously.

"Oh, crap!?"

They did not know the size or location of the enemy group. But as he ducked down and moved up alongside a tank, it was not the immediate enemy on Heivia's mind.

"If this causes a commotion, the Paper Bikini will be back! We need to take them out fast!!"

He raised his rifle which had various sensors attached, but then he clicked his tongue. The thermal reading was useless thanks to the high temperature and humidity and the microwave anti-personnel radar was useless thanks to all the trees in the way. But he could not complain either since this was exactly why the Object had overlooked them.

"Warning to 5 o'clock. We're about to move, so make sure you aren't caught in the treads. We've shut off the anti-personnel radar safety feature, so try not to get killed by the self-driving mode!!"

"Hold on! If you move, we'll lose our shield!"

"They're targeting us with a rocket," replied Dorothea. "Arr pee gee!"

The tank jerked forward like an inexperienced driver messing up with the clutch. When he saw their wire-attached cart fly his way like a morning star, Quenser frantically got down on the ground. Immediately afterwards, an explosive sliced through the air with a thin trail of smoke behind it. The rocket just missed the back end of Dorothea's tank and flew into the forest on the opposite side, where a flash of light and explosive blast erupted out. Even if they could be made into Object armor, trees were only trees. That sounded somewhat philosophical, but no amount of pondering would change their physical durability.

No complaints or objections were being accepted.

They must have decided they would get hit by friendly fire if this continued for long because the suntanned Faith Organization soldiers broke through the smoke and emerged from the blown-up trees.

However, they were out of luck because those were not school swimsuit tan lines and because they

were not girls.

“You sons of bitches!!”

Heivia hopped to his feet. He grabbed at a stubbly middle-aged man’s bayonet-equipped rifle, yanked it from the man’s grasp, dropped it to their feet, and grabbed the man’s collar. He then swung the man around and tossed him into the side of Dorothea’s tank which was turning nearby.

The enemy soldier’s back hitting the tank’s body triggered a reaction in the phonebook-sized boxes covering the surface. More and more of the pressure-activated reactive armor erupted, splitting the Faith Organization soldier’s torso in two along with the bulletproof jacket he wore.

“Blowing the enemy to pieces is fine and all, but try not to rupture their stomach and intestines!” complained Dorothea. “Now my ride is covered in puke and shit! Show some respect for this ultimate luxury vehicle loaded with the world-renowned Rosenkavalier engine!!”

“Oh, shut up. We’re risking our lives out here!! And we need support at 5 and 9 o’clock!!”

“Aye, sir.”

Instead of the tank’s gun, the heavy machinegun near the hatch at the very top of the turret began turning on its own like a telescope pursuing the stars in the sky. Unlike the self-driving tank, this part lacked the accuracy of a clock’s hands. Dorothea was probably letting the program control the driving while she focused on this shooting game. The turret-style heavy machinegun fired bullets thicker than a human thumb at a rate of 2000 per minute. A horizontal sweep of full-auto fire made short work of the mangrove trees along with the enemy soldiers hiding among them.

The initial surprise attack could be fearsome, but once the tank survived primetime and recovered, a group of infantry was not a threat. Even if the soldiers gathered at a distance, an explosive shell could finish them off. And if they tried approaching, the heavy machinegun could push them back.

There was only one real concern.

“Ah!” shouted Quenser while needlessly sitting in the shallow water.

An enemy had covered his face and limbs with his allies’ blood and hid among the corpses, but now he stood up. He was targeting the tank and he held something shaped like a spindle or a rugby ball. It was probably a spare anti-tank rocket warhead. After the gunner was lost, he must have been holding onto it and waiting for this chance. Heivia noticed and fired his assault rifle, but the man did not stop even after being shot in the back. He made the final step and collapsed in something of a tackle against Dorothea’s tank.

Dorothea spun the turret around to face the opposite direction of the attacker.

The electric fuse on the tip of the rugby ball was triggered, an explosive blast burst out, and the Faith Organization soldier was blasted in the opposite direction.

“Noooo! Not more gore!”

“Hey, um...are you okay?”

“The reactive armor scattered the blast, so there wasn’t any armor damage. Whether it’s a rocket, a missile, or an anti-tank mine, all tech generally focuses the blast onto a single point to form a metal

jet. As you can see, I protected the gun which is the most delicate part.”

“...That armor isn’t that convenient. You can only use it once, so another attack to the same spot will break through the armor.”

“Yeah...ta ha ha. And clothing damage isn’t exactly sexy when it’s on a tank.”

“You just need the container, a thin metal panel, and a plastic explosive to attach to the underside of the box, right? I can set back up the lost scales for you.”

That charge had apparently been the last.

That said, they had fought a battle and caused plenty of explosions. If they did not do something soon, they would be helplessly exposed to the Paper Bikini’s cannon fire. They would be killed by that colossal experimental weapon meant for the coming Age of Starvation.

“What exactly do we do now? If we just move from here at full speed and hide below the tree branches, do you really think they’ll overlook the tanks? They’re pretty big, if you hadn’t noticed!”

“We can’t hope for that, but let’s use everything at our disposal.”

“?”

“The Paper Bikini is definitely the biggest threat, but there’s only one of it. Its coilgun main cannons are made for firing directly horizontally, so they shouldn’t be able to fire extreme long range shots along an arc.”

Quenser focused on the radio he had borrowed from the Information Alliance.

However, he was not going to speak to the tank right next to him.

“Dorothea, connect this cheap radio to the Flagship 019. Use the tank to amplify the signal.”

“Hey, long-range is a really bad idea,” warned Heivia. “The Paper Bikini will detect it!”

“Fine, but what are you going to do?” asked Dorothea.

“Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. You said you specialize in troubleshooting, right? I want some help from the Stopgap Grim Reaper.”

It was a bit staticky, but he was connected to the other Martini girl.

“Diligent sewer rats,” replied the blonde girl wearing a black uniform. “There is not much I can do, but I will hear you out.”

“You sure are acting full of yourself when there isn’t much you can do, my tiny little kitten. The Paper Bikini has its eyes on us, so I want to give it a higher priority target. Simply put, send out an aerial bombing drone or something and cause a flashy explosion somewhere else entirely.”

“Most people would not want to give a lecture to such a smug moron, but fortunately for you, I am a kind young woman: like hell we can do that, newbie. Do that and the Object will register the beached Flagship 019 as an enemy and target us. Have you forgotten we need to put on an internal and external show of how directly and continually helpless we are on land?”

She was blunt.

But just like an expert at restructuring failing corporations, this expert troubleshooter was not just telling the soldiers on the scene to die.

“So we will send a powerful directional signal out from the ship. It will be encrypted, so it can just be gibberish. An honorable fool will assume there is a secret-filled Information Alliance base using an antenna to receive some kind of important intelligence. The best way to lay a trap has always been to trick the enemy into thinking they can accomplish something praiseworthy. Like a tablet inside a bomb-resistant case or wiring together a sealed ammo case and a landmine.”

“I see,” said Quenser while nodding despite speaking over the radio.

“Now, where should we send it?” asked Wraith.

The boy glanced toward the tank’s lenses which had just made small whirl.

“Let’s avoid any villages or access routes people use to travel. Oh, I know. Use coordinate 2282-5465. That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Understood. I’ll trust your knowledge of the land after going around blowing up those heroin plants.”

Part 5

The Princess was utterly bored.

The Legitimacy Kingdom was assisting the warship that had been beached by the storm, but that left nothing for the Object to do. However, without the Object staring it down, there was a risk of the ship’s guns making a surprise attack.

Thus, she was stuck on standby.

“Ahh, ahh. I want to get some exercise.”

The Princess’s privileged comment would have received a flood of hostility from the potatoes digging on the goddamn beach had they heard her. Regardless, this meant it was time for some seated stretches inside the perfectly air-conditioned cockpit.

...That might sound like neglecting her duties, but she would not do anyone any good if she succumbed to economy class syndrome before the battle even began. Her chair had a massage function, but that was far from perfect and it was recommended that she do some calisthenics when she had the spare time.

She reached for the thick manual stuck beneath the seat.

“Let’s see... Remove the seatbelts and shift your butt in front of the seat.”

Her small butt slid forward.

“Place your head at the bottom of the seat back. Lift your legs up higher than your head and move them like pedaling a bicycle. One, two, one two...”

Just then, she received a call.

Plus, it was a video call and her little butt was sticking up right in front of the face camera.

“Princess, we have an emergency ca-...oh, dear.”

“Eek!!!??? D-do you need something?”

“Um, well, uh...no, no, you can stay like that. ...Now, where did I put that emergency counseling number? Thrill seeking through exhibitionism was certainly not the route I expected from her...”

“No, wait! This isn’t bizarre behavior brought on by excessive loneliness! Don’t call the counselor, Frolaytia!!”

Part 6

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray looked highly sadistic, but (as long as she could use you as a pawn) she apparently did not completely throw out her kindness. She must have done her part because the Paper Bikini moved elsewhere and the tank unit was not exposed and slaughtered.

“I’m starting to think being on their side wouldn’t be all that bad. Being a New Yorker sounds kind of nice, doesn’t it?”

“Heivia, that’s got to be some brainwashing using the suspension bridge effect or the exhaustion effect. Look at this rationally, compare the size of their boobs, and you’ll remember just which commander is better.”

However, they had lost some of the carts attached to the backs of the tanks due to the infantry battle with rockets flying everywhere, so the infantry had to take turns walking and resting. Well, that or get into fistfights over who got a spot on the surviving carts.

Then they heard a cute grunt of effort.

They looked up to see the hatch at the top of the tank turret open up. The person who climbed out was a small girl using a barrette to keep her red hair back in a pineapple shape.

“Uhyah. Man is it hot out here. I’m sweating already...”

To prevent hearing loss, she wore something like airtight headphones over her ears. She also had a different small earphone and a wireless mic on her throat, but she was not wearing any sort of helmet.

For that matter, she was not wearing a jacket and she was not wearing pants or a skirt either.

They were on the front line, yet she was wearing nothing more than a white blouse and panties. Her outfit was blatantly just sleepwear.

“Both her thighs and navel are exposed!? Are you a legit shut-in who’s forgotten what day of the week it is!? Just how casual are you taking this!? From this low angle, it’s impossible to miss those blood-orange side-string panties!!”

“Nn, hh...???”

After a slight groan, she removed the headgear and placed it around her neck with a puzzled look. She apparently had not heard him, but she was able to guess what his question was based on his lip movements.

“Shut up. We need to wash all this gore off my ride before it dries. I’ll give you a bucket, so go get some water.”

Based on her, the other drivers may have been wearing pajamas and negligee too. The boy hesitantly accepted the metal bucket dropped down toward him, but then he found some kind of trash in the bottom.

It was the plastic wrapper for a pack of trading cards.

The cards were from a series meant for a female demographic that anthropomorphized the world’s machineguns and had you build a unit and give them an idol debut. You were meant to raise the sharp-tongued AI characters through their school life in a boys dorm where they would clash with their rivals and solve mysteries at a café afterschool. Quenser remembered hearing something about using a smartphone app to read the code on the cards to reach even further depths in that inescapable quicksand of a game.

(Don’t tell me she’s addicted to this stuff? And is she what the Island Nation calls a fujoshi?)

Just as he started doubting his conclusion, he found something more.

It was a receipt for one body pillow and one bottle of men’s shampoo.

(She said something about loneliness countermeasures for when she’s alone, but if this is a complication of that ‘rotten’ disease of hers, her case is really severe...!!)

“?”

Not everyone was willing to be open about their secret interests, so he could not predict how she would react if he was honest here. In the worst case, letting that sleepwear girl – whose blouse was unbuttoned on the bottom and revealing her navel – know what he had seen could lead to her chasing after him in that 50-ton tank in the hopes of running him over and silencing him! Sensing danger, Quenser quickly changed the subject.

“The entire tank is covered in reactive armor, so where do you climb down?”

“Over there or over there,” she said while lazily pointing toward the corners of the tank which were likely the hardest points. Quenser used those paths to hold the seawater-filled bucket up as an offering to the pineapple-haired girl.

He had fulfilled her orders perfectly, but she still seemed irritated.

“Ohh, this is just the worst, the worst, the worst... I normally wouldn’t want seawater anywhere near my precious ride...”

“Shut up, you’re the one that was driving it through all this seawater covering the mangrove!”

“If we start driving again like this, you’ll get all the gore right on your heads as you ride your cart. Are you sure you want that?”

The potatoes groaned and gagged as the pineapple girl’s words quieted them down. They could not exactly complain when they had done this themselves.

“This is the latest product of Rosenkavalier, a status symbol for the wealthy the world over. Its elegant form manages both a low hit rate and excellent aerodynamics. Plus, the engine provides

both quick bursts of speed and high horsepower! Let the rumble of the engine intoxicate you! Well, I doubt some fancy-pants Legitimacy Kingdom nobles would understand when you people are happy in the back seat of something as overly-long as a dachshund and only worth a million bucks. Tanks are doing battle in a world worth ten times as much.”

“Then why don’t you go ahead and paint that lame penis logo on the front of the tank!?”

“P-penis...!? (blush)”

“What else is that curved thing supposed to look like!?”

It was actually based on the tower card in tarot and represented the company’s constant vigilance to make sure they never grew arrogant even when they stood at the top of the world, but that did not really matter here.

“There, I’ve finished replacing the reactive armor. That should make up for what you lost.”

“Th-thanks so much. Oh, you even got the color right so it doesn’t stand out. It loses points for not being the maker’s official product, but I still appreciate the effort□”

“It really only needed to function properly, but once I got started, I felt my modeling spirit beginning to burn.”

“I know just what you mean.”

For the paint, he had used the kit meant to apply makeup to the face, hands, or anywhere else that stuck out from the camouflage. Everyone might have forgotten by this point, but those idiots had just returned from a serious job where they hid deep in the forest and blew up heroin factories. ...This seemed to be a world where actual effort only made things worse for you.

“Okay, if we’re done sunbathing, let’s get back to work. I’m headed back down into my workplace.”

“Dammit, I can feel the chilly air-conditioning coming from that open hatch...!”

Their complaints were of course ignored and Dorothea even shivered in her navel-exposing blouse. The difference in temperature seemed to be affecting her. Now that they had washed off the filth and replaced the reactive armor, the girl ducked back into the hatch.

But she forgot to close it.

And that meant the indoor sleepwear girl’s odd comment escaped the confines of the tank.

“Ohh, did you miss me, my blond butler? Huggy huggy.”

(Is she talking to a two-sided body pillow made to look like a sharp-tongued butler?)

“Yes, I know you’re shy, but let’s aim your main gun forward. Hwa ha ha. Don’t cover your face and blush. That thing is impressive enough to show off to anyone.”

(Ehhh!? The tank itself is a guy♂!? Then why have I been working so hard for it? C-come to think of it, little Wraithy had a real butler serving her. She did warn me not to look into it, but what is this Martini Series...!?)

The hatch finally closed.

Had the red-haired pineapple girl noticed her mistake or not?

She once more began driving her prince or butler or whatever. The infantry figured out who got seats on the limited carts and the entirely self-driving tanks resumed their perfectly aligned drive through the submerged mangrove. But eventually, something changed.

"We're about at the midpoint," said Dorothea. "We should be reaching the levee soon."

"We're only halfway? That's depressing as hell."

"Stop complaining when you're just clinging to a cart. You're not even walking anymore."

"It's like riding on the slow train... Y'know, like when you've felt the shaking of the train for hours on end with no real destination in mind."

"But why would they build a levee here?" asked Heivia.

He was probably asking because building a levee in the middle of this submerged area did not seem very helpful.

"It's apparently to create a fish reef instead of preventing flooding," said Dorothea. "Something about redeveloping the zones that were lost due to fires. At least that's what it says on these online tourist guides."

"Ehh? You have air conditioning and the internet on the battlefield? You really have it made."

"Oh ho ho. I even have a simple shower and kitchen."

"I'm really worried by the lack of a bathroom on your list there... I don't want to hear that a girl like you is friends with drink bottles..."

In the distance, they could see a horizontal row of concrete masses with four legs arranged in Y-shapes.

The mangrove's trees had thinned out, so they came to a stop right on the edge.

Quenser and Heivia ended their time as summer Santas of the southern hemisphere and circled in front of the first tank to join the other soldiers in investigating things from between the trees.

"Oh no..." Quenser groaned as soon as he gave a look through his binoculars. "Oh no, oh no, oh no! That's a Faith Organization tank unit. They've set up a defensive line."

"What!?! How could they block off our route with such pinpoint precision!?! Where'd they get that intel from!?"

They no longer heard anything from the radio.

Dorothea and the other tank operators had apparently shut down the radios to remain silent.

They were about 1.2 kilometers from the levee. The horizontal wall had gaps in places, so it definitely was not meant to hold back any high waves. It was a little hard to tell, but there were tanks waiting behind that wall. Only the turrets stuck up above it while they used the obstacle as a shield.

"It might not just be here." Quenser thought for a bit. "Little Wraithy shook the Faith Organization for us, but that only changed their order of priority. The Second Generation Paper Bikini left, but it makes sense that they would send their tanks to investigate the combat region. They blocked off all the routes around the suspicious point and we just ran into one of those blockades."

Would they break through here or send the less-noticeable infantry out ahead to search for a way to sneak through?

"We'll just have to do this. The blockade will only grow thicker as time passes. Look at them: they only have three tanks and a bit of infantry. We outnumber them, so it would be better to trample them before their friends show up from elsewhere."

"..."

"Trying to trick them would only make things worse. We might be in a submerged mangrove, but that won't hide the tanks' tread tracks forever. Once they start tracking us for real, it's all over."

"No, not that," said Quenser. "What's that noise?"

He then looked up at the roof of trees over their heads.

The noise of the main rotor had been reduced quite a bit in recent years, so he had heard they could get quite close before you heard them.

In other words, he heard the sound of a rotor beating at the air as a giant attack helicopter passed by overhead.

Helicopters came in many varieties, but this one was relatively short and stout. Instead of reducing its exposed surface area to avoid being hit, it seemed designed to deflect attacks with its thick armor panels. In addition to simple aerial firepower, it may have carried groups of soldiers.

Another attack had begun.

Instead of accurately pursuing a target, the rockets contained in beehive-like cylindrical containers were launched along straight lines that provided destruction over a fan-shaped area.

Quenser stood there helplessly with his mouth agape, so Heivia tackled him at the waist and tumbled along the ground with him.

"Get down!" he shouted. "Everyone, get down!!"

Luck was on their side.

The rockets raining down from above seemed to have their fuses set for an instantaneous detonation, so they detonated on the roof of mangrove branches long before reaching the ground. Thanks to that, the blast blossomed outside of lethal range and the tank armor was not penetrated despite an attack from their greatest weak point: above.

But what about the flesh-and-blood soldiers?

Razor-like fragments of the explosives poured down and their own tanks, which normally acted as their shields, threw deadly stones as their reactive armor detonated erroneously. The carts made from scrap parts were torn apart and blown away and the same amount of damage scattered over the soft and fleshy soldiers.

“That’s an attack helicopter!! It’s a tank’s worst enemy!!”

They could not just lie low and wait it out.

The large helicopter flew in a large circle through the blue sky and was clearly taking aim once more. Plus, the tanks waiting behind the levee of blocks with four legs arranged in Y-shapes began to take action.

The Tank 041s had been waiting in a line, but now they began to move. They broke their perfectly aligned formation and scattered. They had likely switched from self-driving mode to manual driving mode.

While nearly run over by their own side’s tanks and nearly hit by the morning stars that the wreckage of their carts had become, Quenser and the others desperately rolled along the ground in search of safety. And they were well aware safety was nowhere to be found.

The mangrove’s shallow seawater was stained with the red of blood.

A rusty smell mixed in with the scent of salt and mud.

The crabs and shrimp had been acting like docile little animals before, but now they grew energized. They had been waiting for all that nutritious bipedal meat to stop moving.

“Get the injured sitting up and prop them against a tree trunk! Calf height water is enough to drown in! Then gather below the thicker portions of the ‘roof’! Another downpour of rockets in an open area and we’ll actually be directly hit!!”

“No, that ‘roof’ would be in the way,” said Dorothea. “I’m heading out into the open, so give me a smokescreen.”

Just as she said that over the radio, her tank left the mangrove and entered the open battlefield.

The attack helicopter naturally took aim and rushed in toward her, but the other tanks fired smoke and blocked the enemy’s vision.

It seemed modern tanks had anti-air equipment.

The Tank 041s had four vertical missiles located behind the turret.

Quenser just about groaned when he saw the missiles fired upwards with the sound of a champagne cork popping amplified over a hundredfold. They were not just short-range; these were the same missiles as the shoulder-fired variety used by infantry.

Attack helicopters were probably easier to target than a supersonic fighter, but this one still twisted around and scattered firework-like flares. That was enough for the puny missiles, which looked like two fire extinguishers attached end to end, to fly off into empty air like rocket fireworks.

And it did not end with that failed attack.

Just as the Tank 041s had moved forward, the Faith Organization tank unit at the levee took action. There were a few lights similar to a camera flash.

Yes, a tank’s muzzle flash was faster than the sound of it firing.

“Oh, no!?”

Dorothea’s tank tried to return to the deep forest while crushing the cart it was dragging, but a shell flew toward it at Mach 5 from a distance of about 1.2 kilometers.

Dorothea immediately released the pressure from the hydraulic suspension to abandon her support and let the tank’s body sink down. By effectively ducking, she avoided the first shot targeting the top of the turret. The second shot targeted its gut from a different angle, so she turned the body at an angle – so the shell would hit the solid corner of the rectangle – to redirect the shell upwards while the armor was torn away.

She was not using lasers, EM waves, or some other lock-on medium to detect and predict the ballistic path.

Most likely, this was Dorothea Martini Naked’s skill which could not be reproduced by the self-driving mode.

(She did that by eye!? She was only basing it on the sunlight reflected from the muzzles!?)

Her defensive actions seemed like a superhuman combination of the digital and analog, but it was obvious where the missed shell was headed: into the forest where the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers hid.

“Goddammit!!”

They had agreed to no hard feelings, but it felt like the ground they had been hiding on had been flipped upside down. A rusty flavor spread inside Quenser’s mouth and his inner ear seemed to be having issues because he could not get up. He had no idea which way was up and the shallow seawater blocked his mouth and nose.

“Here’s some information...!! I think...enem...shells...armor pierc...chemical...get through...armor...so be careful!!”

Dorothea was shouting something over the radio, but no whole sentences were getting through to him. Was that because of the seawater in his ears or had something gone wrong in his head?

“These aren’t anti-personnel rounds! Don’t act like the shockwave alone was too much for you! If you’re gonna die, do it after killing the enemy, you dumbass!!”

Quenser finally returned to reality after Heivia kicked him in the gut. He coughed up all the seawater in his throat and nose.

“Ugh, cough!!”

“This operation has failed!! We can’t continue on!! There are too many injuries and there’s an attack helicopter flying around! Dorothea, if you have some extra shells, give them all timed fuses and prepare to destroy the evidence. We just have to make sure no one finds out the tanks were loaded in the Flagship 019, right? File off the serial numbers, get out of there, and blow it up from the inside!!”

“No!!”

But the girl vehemently rejected that idea.

"We have to get these five tanks to the former airfield no matter what. Protect them with your lives! I repeat, protect them with your lives!!"

"Set aside that slender-chinned blond butler in glasses, sleepwear blouse girl!!"

"Sbh!? H-heh hee hee. How did Sir Quenser discover my true form? ...No, no!! We can't! It isn't about that! We just can't give up on them!!"

"...Oh, hell."

Quenser got up and pressed his back against a broken tree trunk.

"Dorothea, you can complain if you like, but what's the actual situation here?"

"This RTS session is not looking good. The attack helicopter overhead is especially bad!!"

"But what if it was just their tanks?"

"If they think they're invincible with just their heads sticking up over the levee, they can't be all that skilled. Unlike a stationary turret, a tank is all about its mobility□"

"Then get to work silencing them. We'll deal with that thing in the air."

Just as he said that, the five Information Alliance Tank 041s left the mangrove forest and entered the open battlefield. If they simply aimed from there, they should not have been able to hit the Faith Organization tanks located behind the levee wall, but...

"Everyone, load explosive shells. Let's do this!!"

"What!?" shouted Heivia. "Aren't those anti-personnel!?"

But his complaints did not change anything.

All the nearby potatoes were knocked from their feet by the tremendous noise of shellfire.

Dorothea and the other tanks were not targeting the enemy tanks. They had fired on the levee in front of them. And instead of a single thick wall of reinforced concrete, the levee was made from blocks that supported their weight on four legs arranged in Y-shapes. There was no adhesive or welding. By firing shells that scattered an explosive blast and shrapnel in every direction, the blocks were shattered and knocked from their supports before tumbling back down.

There was no need to crush the tanks themselves.

Their mistake had been taking up a position so close to the levee. Concrete blocks larger than a human head rained down on the long and narrow tank guns, denting and bending those metal tubes.

"Enemies A, B, and C have all taken damage to their guns! The tank unit is useless, or at least not a threat to the Tank 041s. How about the sky? What about the attack helicopter!?"

They had left the mangrove forest for that simultaneous attack. That position allowed the attack helicopter to fly in a straight line and slaughter them all with rockets.

Quenser leaned against a broken tree trunk while holding an Information Alliance radio.

He breathed in and out.

He placed his finger on the button.

But he did nothing.

And said nothing.

“Wait...?”

Dorothea was clearly shocked. Her tank pitched forward in a way impossible for the self-driving mode and then it frantically backed up toward the forest.

“What happened to our deal!? You said you’d do something about that chopper! Could you not come up with any clever plans!?”

“No, what happened to our deal?”

Quenser did not back down.

He did not lose sight of the odd feeling he had noticed.

“Protect the tanks with our lives? Get them to the former airfield no matter what? Why!?”

“Did the blood rush to your head after seeing your allies killed!? If the affiliation of these tanks is found out, the cooperative action surrounding the Flagship 019 will be nullified and a point-blank battle between the Information Alliance and the Legitimacy Kingdom will break out. To prevent that incalculable amount of bloodshed, the existence of these tanks must be hidden. Wasn’t this explained to you!?”

“That’s not quite right, Dorothea! There’s no point in hiding them at the airfield when we have a bunch of enemies on our tail! I thought that was a temporary hiding place and the tanks would be picked up at a later date!? That won’t work if the Faith Organization ransacks the place in the meantime!!”

“...!?”

“Besides, if all we have to do is hide the existence of the tanks, there was no need to keep the Paper Bikini from noticing them! If we managed to escape before that extra-large main cannon blew them away, no material evidence would remain!! ...What have you gotten us involved in, Dorothea? What secret are these tanks hiding!?”

“This is not the time...!!”

“Then I’ll just wait until you’ve been blown away. The attack helicopter will target the large metal readings first. Since the rockets detonated in the branches earlier, it must not be loaded with proper anti-personnel sensors like an Object would be. If we fall back into the forest and wait for the heat to die down, we can check the scorched wreckage and determine the truth. I’m fine doing this either way.”

“You!!”

“Choose, Dorothea. Which will it be? Tell us now, or have us find out later?”

The approaching footsteps of death reverberated through the sky overhead. They squeezed at the impish girl's heart more than the ticking of a time bomb.

And...

And...

And...

"Okay, fine! I'll tell you everything! This is a project using the tanks' drive-by-light systems to manipulate the number of deaths by self-driving cars in safe countries!!"

The wireless device he had borrowed from the Information Alliance vibrated.

It had received a file via short-range infrared instead of using a military server.

After checking the large attached file on the small screen, Quenser slowly stood up.

"I have your commitment."

"What are you going to-....!?"

"All tanks, use your smoke!! Make sure you can't be seen from a distance!!"

In addition to naked-eye sight, the smokescreen spread by the tanks obstructed mechanical cameras and sensors by blocking various media, including electromagnetic, infrared, and ultrasound.

The attack helicopter had three options:

1. Recapture its targets using a different type of sensor.
2. Increase the power of the current sensor to pierce through the smokescreen.

And...

3. Simplest of all, move in closer so its radar waves and IR signal could pierce through the smokescreen.

It was the same as asking whether the same voice could pass through a thin wall or a thick wall more easily. That was the fastest way to strengthen its sensors with no need for extra equipment.

But to move closer, it would naturally reduce its altitude.

And that brought it within reach of the group on the surface.

"What are we supposed to do about that thing, Quenser!?"

"We can reach it once it's below 30 meters! Even if it has armor panels, an attack helicopter's belly should be thinner than a tank's!!"

"30 meters!? The missiles from one of those crashed fighters covered in greenery aren't going to work anymore! Or are you thinking of throwing a balled up piece of clay at it!?"

"There isn't time to explain!!"

Quenser shouted back as he pulled a small cooking knife from his survival kit, grabbed a piece of wood floating in the water nearby, and carved something into it with the tip of the knife. Heivia glanced down as if peering at a smartphone, but it was filled with functions and equations that might as well have been an alien language to him.

“Okay, a helmet should work... That just leaves filling it in and adjusting the angle...”

Idiot #1 grabbed a helmet from the ground, filled it with the sand and gravel at his feet, and adjusted the angle. He then attached a thin layer of Hand Axe plastic explosive over the top. For the finishing touch, he stuck a pen-like electric fuse into the deepest part in the center.

There were two varieties of directional landmines: concave and convex.

It worked the same as a mirror. The convex variety would scatter the blast thinly across a wide fan-shaped area. By mixing it with lots of metal balls or something similar, it would become a brutal anti-personnel mine that made short work of all the enemy soldiers in front of it with a single explosion.

So what if it was concave, like Quenser’s here?

Just think of it like a mirror again.

Concave mirrors were made to focus light on a single point.

“Directional mines meant for armored weapons can split the door to an office safe from 30 meters away. And it doesn’t matter if that distance is horizontal or vertical.”

Needless to say, he already knew what aerial course the attack helicopter was using.

It would be unable to resist the straight line that allowed it to slaughter all five tanks at once.

He only had to toss the helmet to a point on that line.

“Did you think you were safe up there in the sky? It’s time a landmine dragged you down to earth, you ruler of the air!!”

A lance of fire shot up as if to pierce the heavens.

Concentrating the blast on a single point produced penetrative power that was normally impossible and that tore through the belly of the attack helicopter and fried every last centimeter of space inside.

Part 7

“Oh, god! My legs are so swollen!!”

She belonged to the same military, but Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had no intention of looking after the beached ship. She dove into a beach chair beneath a parasol and pulled off both her boots and her black pants.

All that remained below were her bright white legs. Either due to the length of her jacket or her professional(?) spirit, her underwear was just barely out of sight.

“Frank.”

While lying in the chair, the blonde girl called over the young man who always served her.

And she spoke as if this was the usual way of doing things.

"It's time to adjust my performance. Sorry, but could you massage my legs to improve blood flow?"

That was not an issue.

He did not even hesitate.

The young man looked like some kind of machine while he reached for the girl's soft legs and applied the perfect amount of pressure to massage Wraith's ankles, calves, and then thighs. He was simply returning the gathered blood up to her torso with movements like someone squeezing sauce inside a plastic container. There was no ulterior motive hidden in the movements of his fingertips and he showed no sign of peeking at the underwear only protected by the skirt-less bottom of her jacket.

"..."

For some reason, Wraith looked incredibly bored.

"Tah."

So she began gently attacking the young man's cheek with the sole of her tiny foot.

She tried rubbing the heel against him, but the young man did not respond. He only continued with his work.

That could be seen as an admirable attention to his duties, but the look in the small blonde girl's eyes moved past anger and arrived at exasperation.

"You really are...how should I put it? A boring guy."

He did not even respond. They had had this conversation countless times before.

Wraith no longer expected anything from him, so she simply left her body in the young man's hands and lost herself in thought as if separating her mind from her body.

The first thing that came to mind was those idiots who were like an incarnation of rebellion.

Now those were people worth bullying.

"Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell, hm? ...Interesting. Hoo hee hee. What kind of nonsense should I make them do next?"

Just as her true thoughts leaked out, something odd happened.

She had not ordered him to, but the silent young man began digging his thumb into the bottom of her foot. Little Wraithy's shriek echoed across the white beach like someone had stepped on a kitten's tail.

The young man was this Martini's bodyguard, but he also functioned as a safety to keep her under control. ...How each individual bodyguard accomplished this was up to them.

Part 8

The threat of the Faith Organization attack helicopter had passed.

Dorothea had survived, but only after violating military regulations by sending the following file to Quenser:

We ask for assistance in researching the fully self-driving cars which are currently being implemented within safe country cities.

The research in various fields is still underway, but what is ultimately desired is enough experience to qualify as a field test. However, experience on a predetermined circuit or between set hours when traffic is controlled is suboptimal for AI learning.

The world is filled with coincidences and malice.

If a small child runs out in front of the car in a complex downtown area, can it really avoid a collision? Would it mistake a doll or a sign shaped like a child for the real thing and slam on the brakes? Cyber attacks on the program are of course a concern, but will the decision-making program reliant on the GPS map and anti-personnel radar function properly under the effects of powerful jamming?

Can we really eliminate all problems, anticipate all situations, and prevent all incidents of intentional and coincidental accidents?

The answer is simple: no.

Thus, the Information Alliance's Automobile Coordinated Corporate Conference has decided on an acceptable number of accidents. If the number of accidents caused by the implementation of self-driving cars is fewer than the number caused by traditional driver-controlled cars, the corporations can say they improved society and would thus bear no responsibility.

Let us discuss a hypothetical.

If the traditional car culture took 20,000 lives a year, then an identical loss of 20,000 lives would cancel out and leave no responsibility.

...And the same applies if the introduction of self-driving cars reduces the number of accidents by less than 10%.

In other words, the 18,000 deaths leftover are just "excess".

You can say the same thing about the number of people the government or a corporation can get away with killing. Such as the mountains of bodies produced in war year in and year out.

Of course, we will work to reduce the number of deaths.

Taking a program originally used in military tanks and downgrading it for civilian use is one part of that. The vast plains, deserts, and jungles provide much more space to move around in than the complex arrangement of public roads. Plus, the battlefield blesses us with opportunities to test a variety of obstruction tactics such as ambushes, landmines, cyber attacks, and jamming. By repeating field tests here, the driver AI should learn to respond to unexpected situations more flexibly.

Even then, the number cannot be reduced to zero. In fact, it is better this way.

This is a new weapon developed by the military. We are well aware that releasing our “convenient service” will lead to people being killed. More than that, just by messing with the scale on the kind of cold graph seen at life insurance companies, we can wipe out people we dislike. Even entire races or social classes.

We know this, yet we are spreading the technology throughout safe countries.

We wanted to influence the people’s opinion of the technology by saying this was a resilient and safe system that had survived harsh military testing and thus the threat of the manual driving age was over.

That was why failure was not an option on this mission.

They could not afford to lose the hardware inside, so those tanks could not be abandoned.

Also.

The Information Alliance placed price tags on all information and wealth was gathered in the hands of whoever has the most data. This naturally led to giant corporations greedily seeking out, feasting upon, and filling their bellies with the private information of the masses.

As long as the number of accidents remained within the acceptable number, the corporation bore no responsibility. They would still be taken to court or sued by individuals, but it would never go any “higher” than that.

What would happen if this was implemented?

Even in the Information Alliance, there were those who refused to have their data indiscriminately collected. Some people would keep their phone’s GPS turned off and wear glasses or a mask that confused facial recognition programs.

But that would mean they were no longer “recognized as human” by the cameras of the self-driving cars.

And that mistake would increase the rate of accidents.

A car might not even brake as it ran them over in the middle of a crosswalk.

The odds of each incident occurring might be low, but that would build up over time and they would be doomed to die eventually. Yes, just like gradually increasing the amount of salt or fat in the food they ate.

An obvious cyber attack would leave traces of the culprit and be treated as a crime, but if it was setup to look like a “malfunction” in facial recognition of the victim, the position of culprit and victim would switch around. Just like someone running out in front of a car, the dead would be seen as a nuisance and the one at fault.

Meaning...

They were building a system where the uncooperative would be killed without the rulers having to lift a finger. The conspiracy would never be found out. The numbers would look as vague as with carcinogenic materials, but there would in fact be a clear dividing line between who lived and who

died.

In that culture, the demon of statistics would bring certain “death by accident” to any who refused to have their data collected.

Everyone else was constantly monitored by mobile wi-fi bases and drive recorders and, if they showed the slightest sign of refusing cooperation, they would be thrown into the category of “accidental deaths”.

“Gh, kh...”

Inside the tank filled with her hobbies, Dorothea Martini Naked curled up and groaned while wearing only panties and a white blouse with the bottom buttons undone.

Now that she had escaped the fear of death, she could appreciate the true gravity of what she had done. But luckily, the radios given to the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers could not transmit a signal very far. They of course had their output restricted to keep them from sending any unnecessary information to the outside world during an operation. Without amplification from the large antennae on the Tank 041s, they could not send anything back to the Flagship 019 or the world at large. And that equipment was borrowed from the Information Alliance. As long as it was retrieved and destroyed, there was no risk of the document making it to the Legitimacy Kingdom military.

She had already been paid.

No, the amount of money the red-haired pineapple girl had did not matter. The question was how much she could make in the future as someone who could greedily gather all that big data. She needed to use this never-drying spring of money.

Even now, chat text was rapidly scrolling by on a corner of the LCD monitor used to display a variety of strategic information. It was a lot like communication in an online game, but the other posters were the other members of the tank unit wearing their own type of sleepwear, be it pajamas, negligee, or whatever else.

“Energy> Nyahoo, what’re we gonna do, Dorothea?”

“Magienz> That was a major contract violation. Now our sponsor is gonna hunt us down and kill us!”

“Roxeus> Respond, Dorothea!!”

“Trevor> You’re the leader. And you’re the one that got us all involved in this business! You started this, so you can’t just throw in the towel now!!”

Her companions were in the same boat, so their advice only sounded like threats that squeezed at her heart.

She tried to think up a way to break free of that pressure.

And there was a simple answer.

Dorothea only had one option that would allow her to walk brazenly through the world once more.

“...They can’t make it back alive.”

Part 9

The threat of the Faith Organization had passed.

Quenser had extra information on his screen-equipped radio.

It was obvious what would happen.

“Get ready, Heivia.”

“Huh?”

“Dorothea’s group is going to try something. I doubt they’ll let us live after this.”

“Wait...what!? When did they become our enemies!?”

The answer was simple.

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance had been enemies from the beginning. Trust and betrayal were never on the table. So it was only natural for Dorothea’s group to slaughter Quenser’s group in order to wipe clean this inconvenient situation.

“Why would you do this, Quenser?” asked Dorothea. “This is about the traffic infrastructure of the Information Alliance’s foundational cities. What does that matter to Legitimacy Kingdom people like you!?”

“This is a more fundamental problem than war. I can’t just ignore it...”

“We have a \$300,000 a year contract!! Until the day we die, we get enough to buy a new cruiser in Miami every year! Do you really think we’re going to throw that out for your silly reasoning!?”

“I suppose I should’ve expected the Information Alliance to get philosophical on the battlefield. You’re all such pretentious intellectuals.” Quenser smiled fiercely with the borrowed radio in hand. “But does scum really need a reason to kill each other on the battlefield, Dorothea? I’m not talking about secret deals or common interests; this is just what war is.”

“...”

He heard an oddly wet sound through the radio.

Had she bit and bloodied her lip?

Or was it a form of laughter no normal person could imitate?

“...Fine then. It’s all-out war then.”

“Let’s settle this.”

“Are you trying to buy time with this? As long as we survive the primetime surprise attack, the difference between tanks and infantry in a pure head-on clash is absolute. You’ll be turned to mincemeat before you can get anywhere close. Would you prefer being blown up by an explosive shell or torn to pieces by a heavy machinegun? The choice is yours□”

If they were simultaneously locked onto from five direction and exposed to all that great firepower at

once, Quenser's group could not escape. The mangrove forest might be used as materials for an Object, but the tree trunks would just be torn apart if the soldiers tried to hide behind them. And with nothing to provide cover, they would be killed instantly if the tanks began horizontal fire.

If Quenser shaped his explosives to direct the blast, he could indeed pierce through a tank's belly. But these had reactive armor. He would want to detonate the explosive at least within 15 meters and ideally attach it directly to the armor, but Dorothea's group would never give him the opportunity. After all, those heavy machineguns could accurately target him from 1000 meters and the explosive shells from five kilometers. He would never get close.

To sum up, there was nothing they could do.

And yet, while there was tension, there was no fear on Quenser's face as he brought the radio to his mouth.

And he spoke with a thin smile.

"I have your commitment."

A great tremor shook the earth.

It of course came from the main cannon of the Objects that ruled the battlefield.

What had happened?

Wasn't it the Faith Organization's Second Generation Paper Bikini that ruled this place?

It was not.

Something massive produced a deep whistling as it spun through the air. A main cannon had been torn off and blown away. Each individual sheet of paper looked thin and fragile, but by gathering thousands or even tens of thousands of them, this giant cylinder had gained incredible weight and shock resistance. And now it mercilessly stabbed into the ground between Quenser's group and Dorothea's group.

The paper main cannon belonged to the Paper Bikini, an experimental weapon that looked ahead to the coming Age of Starvation.

This meant it had been destroyed at some point.

"Wha-...?"

"Had you forgotten? We belong to the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. We maintain and operate an Object. And that means the Paper Bikini was not the only one on this battlefield. Our Baby Magnum was here too."

"But why now...? Your borrowed radios can't reach the Flagship 019 and I doubt that First Generation would leave the ocean and come here for no reason!!"

"Remember the diversion I had little Wraithy set up?" Quenser smiled. "She sent out a powerful directional signal to hint at the presence of a nonexistent secret base in order to distract the Paper Bikini. ...But what if there really was a military installation there?"

"Ah!?"

...Now, where should we send it?

...Let's avoid any villages or access routes people use to travel. Oh, I know. Use coordinate 2282-5465. That shouldn't be a problem.

...Understood. I'll trust your knowledge of the land after going around blowing up those heroin plants.

What had Wraith's trust sent that signal to?

The answer was obvious.

"If a cutting-edge Second Generation suddenly pinpoint targeted a secret Legitimacy Kingdom base, our cute Princess would have to be scrambled and sent out there."

The rest was a chain reaction.

After heading out and engaging the Paper Bikini in battle, the Baby Magnum would investigate the area and notice any other spontaneous combat.

Even if their signals could not reach the Flagship 019 on the distant beach, the Baby Magnum's largescale mobile radio base was a different story now that it had moved inland.

Of course, Quenser had not planned this all out from the beginning.

He had requested the initial diversion when they had thought the Paper Bikini had left but the Faith Organization's pilgrim soldiers had found them and the Second Generation might just come back. He had been hoping to distract that Object and also get the Baby Magnum involved since that was a job for the Princess. That was all he had been thinking initially.

But it had paid off.

He had smelled something fishy, but had not initially found any actual evidence of anything.

But he had not overlooked it and he had persisted to the very, very end.

"She'll have overhead everything we said here. And since the signal could reach her, she'll also have the secret data you sent me. Your Achilles' heel is already inside the Object's recorder."

Quenser heard a rumbling like approaching thunderclouds.

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder and gave a smiling announcement.

"If you want to cover this up, then be my guest. Let's see that precious tank of yours blow away the Baby Magnum."

Part 10

"Well, that's one of the worst things I've ever heard."

Heivia groaned when Quenser explained the situation to him after they returned to that metal beached whale known as the Flagship 019.

"A rule to dodge responsibility while accepting the deaths of tens of thousands every year?"

Downsizing a program from tanks to civilian cars? You've gotta be kidding me. Was the Information Alliance trying to start a war that covers battlefield country and safe country alike? Not even a thermobaric bomb takes that many lives at once. That'd be like dropping a nuke on their own country as some kind of yearly event."

"The physical hardware that holds the crucial research data was inside Dorothea and the others' tanks. And we had the Princess blow those up after Dorothea's group surrendered and got out of them, right? That settles everything. They've failed to build a 'safe system' they can say withstood military testing. And that also eliminated any evidence of ground forces on the Flagship 019."

"\$300,000 a year for life if you cooperate, huh? That's like winning the lottery."

"Oh, I'm sure they would've been secretly assassinated once all the data was gathered. Agree to pay 'for life' and you don't have to pay a single cent as long as the recipient dies during the first year."

"Ugh..."

"That world power controls everything via information. You have to expect that kind of loophole abuse."

At that point, the two idiots fell silent.

They paused.

After a while, Heivia resumed speaking but more quietly.

"It's hard to say this was really resolved, though."

"You may be right."

They had nipped this incident in the bud.

But what if the planners had a second or third seed planted which simply had not reached the surface yet? If the major automobile makers used some other method to implement self-driving cars under the same system, a traffic infrastructure that used the acceptable number of accidents to automatically assassinate the uncooperative would blossom within the Information Alliance's safe countries.

The rulers need not bother with a cyber attack. If anyone uncooperatively rejected indiscriminate data gathering through drive recorders and mobile wireless stations, the system would automatically kill them in an accident.

"What about that former airbase?"

"The Princess held up another team there. They were probably a retrieval team meant to physically nab the hardware protected by the Tank 041s' thick black boxes. If we'd arrived at the airbase as planned, we probably would've been lined up and shot."

And as they discussed that...

"Hi."

Someone called out to them.

It was a blonde girl in a black uniform unsuited for the beach who had a young man standing behind her like a butler. The young man held a duralumin trunk that was probably the tiny officer's private property. It was the product of a prestigious brand well-known in New York. It was only used to carry luggage, but it had to have cost as much as a car.

This was Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

Tension filled the air like an ominous electric charge, but Quenser held a hand out horizontally to stop Heivia from doing anything.

The young man smiled pleasantly and bowed slightly.

The next thing Quenser knew, the duralumin trunk had fallen to the young man's feet and his hands were free.

He looked like the slender secretary type, but there was something hidden deep in his eyes. And if Wraith was willing to casually approach people armed with rifles or explosives, she must have had absolute trust in the specs of the young man serving her.

Quenser sighed.

"...But does that come from certain 'rotten' interests, or not?"

"???"

Since she looked utterly confused, our cute little Wraithy must not have had that specialized knowledge.

Having found an answer to that question that had been bothering him, Quenser started again.

"I don't envy you your damage control work here. Your project failed pretty spectacularly."

"So it seems. Well, we are the Stopgap Grim Reaper...troubleshooters brought in from outside. To be honest, I'm not all that interested in what happens to the Flagship 019."

A violent and somewhat comical sound followed.

Had it been unlocked or had the lock weakened from overuse? Wraith kicked at the duralumin case that had fallen to the sand at her feet, forcing open the latch. The mass of metal looked solid enough to use as a shield, but that was enough for it to split open like a bivalve. However, it did not contain stacks of cash, bars of gold, classified documents, tropical clothing, or cute underwear.

It contained a shirt and underwear. More notably, this clothing was worn by a lonely old man with his hands and feet bound behind him and a gag in his mouth. He lacked the dignity he had shown when protected by all those young women.

"...Alfred Silverking..."

"The higher ups have decided to keep the chaos to a minimum by firing him, but his subordinates might put up an ill-advised resistance if we took him away right in front of them. He seemed more interested in enjoying himself than helping the Flagship 019 recover, so I thought I would give the old man some excitement by skipping town in secret."

"How hot is it right now? Will he really survive to the airport?"

While the two frightened idiots watched on, the young man carefully pushed the old man back into the duralumin trunk and closed it once more.

It did not matter that he was also part of the Information Alliance. In fact, it did not matter to them if someone was also part of the Martini Series.

They were probably used to it after all the death and failure they had seen.

“...Oh. So that’s what seemed off to me at first.”

“Hm?”

“The Flagship 019. It’s not a battleship or an aircraft carrier. It’s a flagship, so it should be at the center of the fleet. ...But isn’t that categorization really vague? If the registration on paper is all that matters, you could call a rubber boat or a life buoy a flagship.”

“Heh. Hah hah! You’re mentioning that now, you adorable fools!? That was an electronic information control ship wearing the skin of a battlecruiser. And I doubt you need to ask what kind of data it was exchanging and gathering in this case!!”

“...”

“Well, you can see how well that turned out. But my job is to troubleshoot these seemingly impossible problems, so that doesn’t matter to me. Now, gentlemen, until we meet again on whichever battlefield money and information gather on next. Which shouldn’t take long.”

That Martini Series girl waved her hand and walked past Quenser and Heivia.

But then something odd happened.

The blonde girl gently took Quenser’s hand.

And she whispered to him.

“(To be honest, I was sick of that plan for a civilian assassination traffic infrastructure using self-driving cars. You did a lot to help troubleshoot that problem. Out of respect for your righteous anger, I will dig up the rest of the seeds there, so you needn’t worry about it yourself.)”

And just once, she pressed her lovely lips against the back of his hand.

After that, Wraith Martini Vermouthspray really did leave without looking back.

Between the Lines 1

“Nnn.”

While riding a rented urban bicycle, a small girl pressed one slender leg against the ground to come to a short stop in the bike zone in the wide sidewalk. She had her small butt pressed against the bike seat and she raised her arms to stretch. She wore sporty cyclewear and a groan escaped her lovely lips. Despite being in a large metropolis, there was no smog blocking out the sky and the refreshing breeze carried the scent of greenery. Both facts pointed to some unusual city planning.

She had chosen New York for her first long-term leave in a while. The city’s people were walking with a bit too rushed of a pace for a vacation, but she had seen far too much picturesque rural

scenery in the battlefield countries. This was supposedly her hometown, but she had clearly not visited in a while since all the electronic billboards and AR markers flooding Times Square felt more strange than familiar.

It had been a long time since she had seen her parents.

As her hometown, she knew it well, but the city changed very quickly. She should have gone around doing preliminary research if she had wanted to properly enjoy her vacation with her family. The data in which the Information Alliance found value was not just what was found scattered across the internet.

(I wish I could have had father show me around, but for a New Yorker, he really is clueless about what's fashionable...)

OLEDs were used to place the world's largest flat-screen monitor on a gigantic building wall.

"Gather popular objects and battle the world! Oh ho ho! The app is free to play, so anyone can enjoy it! 20 billion downloads to date! And a special collaboration with me is currently underway!!"

(That's more than the population of the earth, isn't it?)

After watching a sexy G-cup woman winking and reading off the advertisement on the building wall, the small girl sighed and slowly shook her head. She had performed that herself, but the flow and density of data in the Information Alliance was insane in several different ways.

At times like this, it was a lot easier being a VR idol whose motion data was used for a CG model. She could ride around on a bike without a disguise and not have to worry about any kind of trouble. And with her personal information protected at the level of a military VIP, no essentially-unemployed cyber reporter with too much time on their hands or amateur paparazzi for a cheap tabloid could discover her identity.

That was how the world worked.

You wanted to know everything about them while they could not see your true identity. That was true of the president of a monstrously-large IT company and it was true of the charismatic leader of an international hacking group. That was why people were so fixated on social media friend counts, why housewives fought to control the neighborhood discussions, and why bartenders and taxi drivers acted like they knew everything. At the very least, that was the essence of the basic pyramid structure envisioned by the people of the Information Alliance.

New York was composed of five different blocks and its registered population alone was 8 million. Include people there as laborers, tourists, and the like, and there were more than 20 million people there on a daily basis. But even with that many eyes on the girl, none of them realized she was the genius girl who was both an Object Pilot Elite and a top idol. Or that bodyguard men in suits were mixed in with the crowd at important points and that a bulletproof car was waiting to evacuate the girl in less than a minute if trouble arose.

But as much as the girl acted like she knew everything that was going on, there were definitely some things that she "could not see". The young man selling gelato from a truck may have wanted to hear the voice of a giant IT company president in person, the beautiful woman covered in brand names who walked by may have put too much faith in the power of cards and found herself buried in debt, and the female officer with long silver hair and brown skin who was leaning out from behind a wall may have disguised herself in a lawyer suit and glasses while she writhed in joy with a video camera

in hand.

(Hm? Did I just have some kind of strange hallucination...???)

While taking a break, the girl accepted a cup of vanilla gelato with cream cheese and raspberry as extra toppings from the RV food truck and did a suspicious double-take, but there was no one at that building corner. If she was seeing hallucinations like that, her job may have been more stressful than she had thought.

(Now, I think I'll finish going through midtown while eating this and then I can head on to uptown. They do say you could see all the major Manhattan sites in a single day if you really tried.)

She knew things that others did not and others might know things she did not. It was important to keep that in mind. At the very least, this world power was not kind enough to hand success to anyone who thought they were a true genius who knew everything. If you ever found yourself convinced of that in your daily life, it was best to assume some third party was already twisting your life to their benefit.

Your possibilities are unlimited.

Any dream can come true if you keep working at it without giving up.

Not everything is determined by your position in the world. There is sure to be someone out there who needs you.

The small girl thought of those stereotypical platitudes, realized they could all be found in her songs, and grimaced. And not because the burnt caramel sauce gathered at the bottom of her vanilla gelato cup was so bitter.

(Maybe I should punch that lyricist next time I see them.)

Of course, her determination here was hampered somewhat by the fact that her punches were about as strong as a playful kitten's.

And the girl had yet to realize something else.

...That successful lyricist was actually a huge fan of the hard rock band Boy Racer and wanted a lot more freedom in what they wrote, but a certain silver-haired and brown-haired someone (who insisted on being called a creator despite not being a manager or an agent and having no experience in the field whatsoever) had such a sharp glare that the lyricist was only allowed to use those platitudes that were one step away from being a nursery rhyme.

This was yet another good example of how the Information Alliance worked.

You knew things that others did not and others knew things you did not.

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