

Part 1

Mariydi Whitewitch.

On charges of disobeying orders, unauthorized combat outside of the operation zone, and attacking an unidentified craft not designated an operation objective, you are to be detained by Royal Air Force Inc.

You are relieved from all duties until an accident investigator from your Sky Blue Inc. arrives from Los Angeles. At that point, a court martial will be held in accordance with Capitalist Corporation military regulations.

...I'm sorry, but that's all I can tell you.

“...”

She was a small girl of around 12.

Her long blonde hair was splayed out on the floor while she lay motionless in the fetal position. This 5m cubic space made of a special alloy was her entire world at the moment.

This was the Northern Restricted Zone and it was currently February.

She was indoors, even if the building wasn't exactly luxurious, but she could see her breaths. In this environment, turning off the heater was more than enough to function as torture. Yet if she tried to complain, the general public would scoff at the idea of a war criminal deserving anything as nice as a heater to warm her cell.

It was surprisingly hard to find sympathy when it came to the true necessities.

“Mariydi. Mariydi Whitewitch.”

Someone in the next cell over knocked on the metal wall, but only weakly. He was starved for entertainment, but solitary confinement had drained him of all his strength. He had a habit of ending up in these cells. He was a known troublemaker within the Royal Air Force PMC. His instincts may have told him either his mind or body would break if he didn't distract himself from the cold.

“Heh heh heh,” laughed the vulgar man. “So what'd you do this time? I'm sure a picture-book lady knight like you's got a good story. Especially if it got you a night in the same filthy detention barracks as me.”

“Oh, shut up. I’m in here for the same thing you are: breaking the rules.”

The small girl grumbled back without getting up from the hard floor, but that only drew the man’s attention.

“You think you’re on the great Klarheit Rubyhunter’s level? You wish. I’ll have you know I’m in here for emptying three bottles of vodka before flying a nondescript stealth fighter. And now that I’ve sobered up, I’m in the mood for a fairy tale, so hurry it up.”

Mariydi felt fairly certain this man needed counseling with a doctor, not a date with a cell, but the battlefield was always cruel. Not everyone would get the care they needed.

She gave in and sighed, disgusted that she could see the breath. She sat up and her long blonde hair fell on her shoulders. But she was less interested in talking than she was in getting her cheek off of the cold floor.

“I disobeyed orders and left the Northern Restricted Zone.”

“What led you to do that?”

“I happened to detect a Longshot CM flying at low altitude toward a large safe country city. That’s the type of cruise missile that snakes along in an S-shape to slip past the ground-based radars. If I hadn’t shot it down, Warsaw would’ve been wiped off the map. It had an FAE warhead.”

“Ah ha ha hya ha!!”

Klarheit guffawed in legitimate amusement.

Mariydi had been altered by the same technology used for Pilot Elites, but she hadn’t been involved in any esper research. Still, she could easily picture the man holding his sides and rolling in his cell beyond the thick metal wall.

“I had no idea that kind of fairy tale was going on while I fought the tremor in my fingers in this frigid box! Goddamn, I chose the wrong time to get thrown in here again. If I’d joined you, I could’ve used the nearly 10 Gs to enjoy the best drink I’ve had in a while!!”

“You like drinking while holding the stick and doing the cobra? It takes a certain kind of talent to drink while experiencing gravity as strong as on Venus.”

“The high Gs constrict your blood vessels, so the alcohol hits your body different. Don’t worry, you’ll understand once you’re older. Once you’ve had a drink while dancing with the angels in heaven, you can never go back.”

Humans had the weird ability to pour any amount of effort into their personal hobbies and entertainment. But maybe Mariydi had no right to judge his obsession since she had never had any alcohol to drink. The sharp-eyed girl had been personally obsessed with coffee and chocolate since she first had them. Although that was less an intentional obsession and more just something that happened on its own. She could guess that alcohol was the same thing for some people.

Then she heard a heavy metallic creaking.

That was not the door to any of the cells in here. It came from further away. Most likely, that was the entrance at the very end of the hall.

“The emperor has arrived in his new clothes.”

Klarheit’s mockery proved accurate.

Solid footsteps approached with the precision of a ticking clock. The face Mariydi spied through the door’s slit made it clear this was someone who had never had any difficulties in her life and handled everything with digital financial data. The woman wore a professional tight skirt suit.

This emperor was in fact an empress, which changed the lush’s attitude entirely. He even made a poor attempt at a whistle.

The cold woman either wasn’t interested or was tuning him out entirely because she placed a hand on her hip in front of Mariydi’s cell door.

“You are the criminal, Mariydi Whitewitch, I assume?”

“Until the court martial, I think you’re supposed to say ‘alleged’. I fully expect that court martial to be rigged against me from the start, but still.”

“I am Samantha Beeskiss, an accident investigator from Sky Blue Inc. It is my job to supervise all court martial proceedings, indict any employee behavior that would harm the company’s bottom line or public image, and to defend you in your court martial which is sure to involve a lot of classified information.”

Was that supposed to be comforting? This was one of the problems with the Capitalist Corporations where the companies held judicial and legislative power.

How could Mariydi expect a fair trial when her attorney was also tasked with protecting the company? The woman was openly announcing she worked on the side of plaintiff and defendant at the same time. Even a fair judge could be manipulated any which way if the prosecution and defense were colluding behind the scenes to control how the trial played out. She could do just about anything in her position.

The woman swiped her finger across a tablet she held like a clipboard. Maybe all the legal calculations were made by the machine and her only real job was to wait for the flat tablet to give her the result. If so, that was just plain sad. She would think she was on the path to a successful career without realizing she was just a pawn.

The computer age had arrived for aerial combat as well. No one flew a fighter jet without any assistance. But pilots still had their pride. They had the pride of a falcon telling them only they could take control of that unruly mechanical beast and bend its flight to their will.

“There are a few things I wish to confirm before the court martial.”

“As my defense attorney, or as the prosecutor?”

“On February 3, 19:20 local time, you ignored ground command’s instructions and left the operation area during Operation Freefall, a joint operation with Royal Air Force Inc. And at around 19:30, you attacked and shot down an unidentified craft flying rapidly outside the Northern Restricted Zone, without even confirming its affiliation first.”

“You can find all the records in my flight recorder.”

“Only wreckage was found from the unidentified craft. The investigation on the surface continues, but it is not looking promising. That means you may have shot down a civilian craft.”

“Nonsense. That was a Longshot CM flying at low altitude for Warsaw. Missiles don’t answer your hails last time I checked and if I hadn’t shot it down then, 1.8 million people would have been roasted.”

“With no way to objectively prove that, the current situation is not in your favor.”

How was she supposed to find objective proof while stuck in a cell and unable to contact anyone? But Mariydi wasn’t stupid enough to ask that out loud. The company clearly wanted to get the trial over with and bury the entire incident ASAP.

“Did that missile scare you that bad?” she asked with a snort of laughter.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“That Longshot CM weaved right past all the ground radars. That means it could also slip past one of your precious Objects. The Sky Blue executives, or maybe someone even higher than that, want to preserve this peaceful age, so they don’t want the fear of missiles making a recurrence. Because...”

“You should fix your habit of speaking based on unfounded speculation and delusions. Unless you’re

trying to anger the prosecutor into making a 'mistake'."

"The fear of missiles leads right to another fear. The fear humanity supposedly conquered with the adoption of those monstrosities you call Objects. This one was only FAE, but they could always load a more powerful warhead in one. Like - oh, I don't know - a nuc-"

The metal door gave a scream.

Samantha Beeskiss may have drawn her sidearm and shot the door.

And without batting an eye, she continued speaking.

"Do try not to spread careless rumors. It leaves a poor impression."

"..."

"You shot down an unidentified craft without permission and without even attempting to identify it. Those are the facts. Any baseless speculation beyond that has no place in a court martial."

This world is diseased, thought Mariydi.

People claimed they had overcome their fear of nukes, but nothing could be further from the truth. They wouldn't have spread "nuke resistant" Objects all over the world if nukes really were a relic of an older age.

They were terrified, so they did everything they could to defend themselves.

And they failed to realize their actions were based in fear.

Almost like someone guzzling pain killers every day and then claiming they needed the medicine because their stomach was constantly upset. And when someone pointed out the source of their fear, they would react violently.

Just like people reacted very differently to self-deprecatingly calling themselves stupid and being called stupid by someone else.

"Heh heh. You claim you shot down a Longshot CM that can slip past a radar network? You had better hope the court martial accepts that a fantasy like that exists."

"It did exist. I know because I shot it down myself."

“Personally, I would find it more believable if you claimed you had captured a ninja on the battlefield.”

The woman on the other side of the door didn't seem to care what happened to Mariydi.

The look on her face said she had no intention of protecting a Sky Blue Inc. employee. She was here to protect the company, not Mariydi.

She pulled out a satellite phone with a thick antenna.

“This is Samantha. The interview is complete. Even if it is just a ritual required for the paperwork. God, I hate the Northern Restricted Zone. I can't wait until I'm back on the company plane where I can take a shower and- eh? What's that? Hello? You're breaking up.”

“Hey.”

“The court martial will proceed as scheduled. Yes, a secret trial with a predetermined outcome. Now, if you will- what? Um, hello?”

“Hey!!”

Mariydi shouted through the door's slit and Samantha clicked her tongue and removed the satellite phone from her ear.

“Yes? Are you under the false impression that I am accepting complaints?”

“It's not that. ...Are you having signal trouble? With one of the PMC's specialized satellite phones?”

“Yes, what of it?”

“That's not good.”

Mariydi Whitewitch looked up at the ceiling and groaned.

Climbing under the bed wouldn't do any good. She thought for a moment and moved to the very corner of the cell, which would structurally be the sturdiest part, and curled up as small as she could manage.

“Like, really not good!! If the interference is coming in intermittent bursts instead of gradually but steady, then this isn't the aurora. You need to get down too! Hurry!!”

“?”

Samantha Beeskiss looked puzzled and probably never did realize what Mariydi was talking about.

Now, what was it Mariydi had mentioned several times now? The enemy was using cruise missiles that took a curving, low-altitude path that could slip through the gaps in a radar network.

And needless to say, a flying object could interfere with an EM signal.

Even if they had been programmed to avoid the stationary radar network, they had no way of avoiding more irregular communication signals.

Part 2

The result was simple enough.

On that day, 104 cruise missiles struck Capitalist Corporations Royal Air Force Inc.'s Jotunheim Air Base.

Part 3

The ceiling suddenly dropped to half its height.

The flickering fluorescent lights went out, but was that darkness actually a blessing in disguise? No, the unseen pressure still bore down on Mariydi.

The thick metal door was blasted into the cell and chunks of reinforced concrete bigger than Mariydi flew through the air in lieu of an explosive blast.

(!? I don't know who's behind this, but the morons actually did it!!)

That had been a lot of missile blasts. She couldn't see the situation outside, but the sound told her these weren't equipped with FAE warheads. If they had been, she would have been dead too. Were those too valuable for the enemy to use them here?

She didn't hear any sirens.

She hoped that was just her own hearing going out temporarily. She didn't want to find out the base had been so thoroughly destroyed it couldn't even sound the alarm.

“Damn.”

She couldn't just wait in here.

The ceiling fell down further, crushing more than half the surface area of the cell's floor. The simple bed made of pipes and the porcelain toilet cracked as they were deformed beyond recognition. It was obvious what would happen to a human caught in that.

"Hey."

Then Mariydi heard a groaning voice.

That meant her ears were functioning, a realization that made the icy girl click her tongue.

The voice came from beyond where the cell's door had been, but the voice was the unusually cheerful one of the man from before. This was Klarheit Rubyhunter, problem child (...child?) of Royal Air Force Inc.

"Ha ha. We'd better thank the big man upstairs. Those infuriating doors are sitting wide open!!"

"Hold it, you drunk. You haven't left your cell, have you? Breaking out will get you shot."

"Sticking around's not exactly an option."

Mariydi let out a visible breath and tilted her head.

"The place is on fire."

She had to look up at the ceiling that was half crushed down by so much pressure.

"And what are we supposed to do about that!? My cell's exit is sealed up with concrete rubble!"

"A normal soldier'd be screwed, yeah. But not you. Curl that tiny body up like a kitten and climb through the gaps. You can't afford to wait until the concrete is red hot."

"What happened to that educated woman!?"

"Couldn't tell you for most of her, but there is an arm in a Sky Blue arbitrator's sleeve on the floor over here. Still holding that tablet even."

The important part was Mariydi wouldn't be shot the instant she evacuated her cell for her own safety. She took a deep breath to calm herself, got down on all fours, and lowered her head. The exit

looked like the toothy maw of a dragon, but there were indeed a lot of gaps between the concrete rubble.

(I hope this is safe. I hate leaving things up to chance. Your calculations are meaningless.)

She stuck her head in a triangular gap and slowly crawled through.

She found a surprise inside.

A thick liquid dripped down on her.

“...”

When she stopped and silently looked up, she found herself eye to eye with someone.

Samantha Beeskiss had been crushed to the point that she was basically part of the concrete rubble now.

“Uh.”

Another attack must have hit the base because the world shook violently around them. Mariydi never did hear what Samantha was trying to say. The jagged concrete pieces slammed together, chewing up the still-living woman.

Claustrophobia pushed in at Mariydi’s heart from all directions.

But backing away wouldn’t solve this. If this hole was sealed, she would be stuck in her cell while the flames and smoke cooked her to death. Her corpse might not rot for three weeks if she was turned into human bacon, but at 12, she wasn’t yet old enough to worry about the condition of her skin.

She clenched her teeth to bear with the rusty smell surrounding her.

She kept crawling to reach the other end of the creaking hole.

Then she heard a dull cracking sound and something else collapsed.

The electrical system must have shorted out because several explosive sounds and flashes of light followed.

“Bwah!!”

Once she finally reached the other side and arrived in the hallway, she found a lanky man with a stubbly chin and messy blond hair looking down at her. That would be Klarheit Rubyhunter. He was skinny but did not look remotely healthy, which may have been thanks to his self-admitted alcoholism.

“Ha ha! Stained with the blood of your enemy!? I thought the legendary ace was supposed to look more presentable than that.”

“I’m just glad that well-dressed woman’s gut didn’t burst. I’d have been covered in her shit, puke, and guts then.”

That was the extent of their conversation about Samantha.

Soldiers never lost much sleep over the death of a superior officer they weren’t fond of.

The space in the hallway felt luxurious after her cell. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the chilly subzero air.

She grimaced at the smoky smell.

The fire didn’t appear to be all that bad, but she still held a hand to her head and groaned, feeling like she had just been handed a cup full of chlorinated tap water after running a full marathon.

“That was more than just one missile that hit. What are things like out there?”

“We’ll know soon enough.”

The hallway was better than her cell, but it was still badly damaged. First of all, the lights were out. Even the lights for the emergency exit and fire alarm were dead. Thick cracks ran through the concrete walls, fluorescent lights had fallen from the ceiling, and sparks flew where wires came into contact. At this point, it was no surprise the fire alarms and sprinklers weren’t working. Some more fundamental system had been destroyed in Royal Air Force Inc.’s Jotunheim Air Base. The whole building could collapse at any moment, but Mariydi felt a great tension and pressure when she considered checking on things outside.

(I was the only one being punished. If Ice Squadron was following their original schedule without their leader, then they would have joined Sky Blue’s Aurora Wing to help defend the mine. So don’t worry. My idiots are up in the sky. They weren’t caught in this bombing, so they’re all fine.)

“Hey, hey.”

The man called out to her like their surroundings didn’t bother him in the slightest. That seemed

inappropriate, but maybe it just meant he had nerves of steel.

“So what do you think’s going on here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I get that the real threat is the cruise missiles making a comeback in the age of Objects. You’re not the lying type and I’m glad you had your point proven so eloquently here. ...But here’s my question: was this just an emotional act of revenge? Or was there some coldly calculated objective behind the attack?”

For a moment, she was a little surprised by how calculating this man was. Klarheit Rubyhunter was far sharper than she would have expected of a drunk.

She let out a visible breath before answering.

“Whoever fired that missile realized they can’t use their secret weapon as long as the Capitalist Corporations hold the skies. And someone must have seen me land here at Jotunheim Air Base after I shot down the missile.”

“So the bastards’ plan isn’t over yet?”

“They seem to have plenty of missiles, but they might not have many FAE warheads. So they blew away the air base to clear the way for their next attack. Damn, that means Warsaw is still in danger!”

She belatedly wished she had Samantha Beeskiss’s satellite phone. The tablet had still been in her severed arm, but its screen had cracked, rendering it useless. The woman was trouble alive and no help dead. In an age where phones and tablets outnumbered the population of the earth, Mariydi would have to deliver her report on foot. She would have to cut across a runway larger than a soccer field and deliver the bad news to the control tower. All while praying she wouldn’t be shot on sight.

With that in mind, she took a peak outside through the bent door.

The biting cold of the Scandinavian night reached her soft cheeks.

What she found was even worse than she had feared.

She instinctively ducked back inside after hearing a sound just as loud as the cheers at a hard rock concert. Something was severely wrong at this air base. For one thing, the runways were supposed to be illuminated at all times, similar to baseball field lit up for a night game, so why was it all wrapped in darkness?

After ducking back inside, she clicked her tongue.

“Why are a ground unit’s tanks driving right over the fence!?”

“So this wasn’t just a long-range bombing? We’re looking at a full-on war here?”

Mariydi heard a quiet sound.

Noticing a soldier casually peeking inside, she slammed a hunk of concrete larger than her fist into the man’s face. And this particular hunk had a piece of rebar thicker than her pinky sticking out. She gave the blunt weapon enough force to knock him over and splatter the contents of his skull across the floor.

The stubbly man behind her took a glance at the dead man’s guns.

“A 9mm handgun and an assault rifle with its aiming assistance computer spread out across multiple parallel processing components instead of concentrated in the scope? So we’re dealing with the Legitimacy Kingdom?”

“But he’s picked up some ‘loot’.”

Mariydi grabbed a familiar Capitalist Corporations communicator and mobile device. They were both covered in blood. He had probably intended to bring them back with him, check them for valuable data, and score some points with his Legitimacy Kingdom military.

Mariydi kept an eye on things outside while she unlocked the communicator in the usual way. The LCD screen’s backlight was terrifying in the dark, but she had no choice at the moment.

“CT, CT!! This is Mariydi Whitewitch of Sky Blue Inc. I’m currently at the front of the detention barracks. Are you willing to hear me out now? This attack was meant to clear the way so their cruise missile can reach its target!! And it looks like it’s the Legitimacy Kingdom that wants to bring us back to an older age.”

“Ksh, ksh, manually...changing...radar angle...kssh!!”

The signal noise was really bad.

Mariydi clicked her tongue. She had seen this before. The noise in Samantha’s signal had preceded the first downpour of missiles.

It wasn’t over yet.

“Another attack is on the way! This is a message from the base commander! Anyone pilots remaining on the ground are to board any craft they can reach on the runways. If you can fly, escape to the sky. I repeat, every last person who can fly needs to escape into the sky!! Kssh!!!!!!”

The transmission ended at the exact time a great tremor ran through the base.

Only afterwards did Mariydi realize one of the tanks' 120mm guns must have hit the control tower.

(Damn.)

She gnashed her teeth, but then the drunk cried out in surprise while aiming the stolen assault rifle out from a gap in the bent door.

“Whoa!? Why the hell are our own people firing on us!?”

“Because you're making all that noise firing a Legitimacy Kingdom toy, you dumbass.”

She quickly had him lower the gun.

That had drawn some unnecessary attention on them and the Legitimacy Kingdom tanks and armored trucks were driving around the runways like they owned the place. Without some kind of plan, they would be turned to Swiss cheese or even mincemeat the instant they stepped outside.

Trying to fortify their position behind a thick wall was meaningless against a tank's gun, so Mariydi Whitewitch crouched down and faced the dead soldier.

“Two smoke grenades, a signal flare, and...is this a smoke bomb? I would love to at least blind that tank...”

“Hold on. Do you have any idea how many runways there are out there? We're talking about five times the size of a soccer field with no cover the entire way across. You can't cover all that with smoke.”

He was right. The threat wasn't over once they left the detention barracks unharmed. They had to survive long enough to board one of the aircrafts on the runways and fly out of here.

The control tower operator had said another attack was on its way, so they didn't have long until hundreds of cruise missiles rained down on their heads.

However...

“How much ammo does that assault rifle have left?”

“Two magazines. That’s not enough for a surprise attack on an enemy base. That dead guy may have had a supply truck or one of those bovine robots with him.”

“Don’t worry about preserving the battery. With all those sensors, even an amateur can shoot like an expert sniper. The problem is how dark it is with the lights out. Aim carefully and fire. Your target is 600m away at 10 o’clock.”

“But that horrible grinding is coming from a Legitimacy Kingdom MBT!”

Mariydi snatched the rifle from sickly skinny Klarheit and swiftly aimed it.

She had been asking him to shoot that tank.

“Gyah!?”

Needless to say, an ordinary bullet could not defeat a tank. The alcoholic gave a pathetic scream when he heard the gunshot. He may have considered her action similar to throwing a pebble at a giant bear.

But she knew what she was doing.

The tank was soon surrounded by something like white cotton candy. She had shot the smoke bomb launcher attached to the side of the tank gun. That was essentially a giant smoke grenade. The smoke produced by those had chemicals and a metal powder mixed in to block sensors and radar in addition to ordinary vision.

The smoke bombs were meant as a lifeline to protect the tank from its natural predator, the attack helicopter, but covering the tank itself with the smoke would impede its own functioning. Using a smoke defense near infantry was a good way to run over your own people by accident. That was a lesson people often learned the hard way in the Northern Restricted Zone.

Mariydi couldn’t cover the entire base with smoke, but she could pinpoint target the tank that was the biggest threat.

“Let’s go.”

She used her other hand to toss the 9mm handgun to Klarheit, grabbed a plastic bottle from the ground, and duct-taped it onto the assault rifle’s muzzle. She doubted that would actually function as a suppressor, but if she didn’t alter the shape of the muzzle flash and sound of the gunshot, she could get shot by the other Capitalist Corporations soldiers.

With that done, she stepped outside.

Into the night.

The ground came in two varieties: ice-cold asphalt and soft Scandinavian soil where little grew.

The air base was quite large. And to efficiently operate the aircraft, it was made flat with all unnecessary obstacles removed, leaving almost nothing to use as cover. It was a very bad place for a firefight.

As Mariydi herself had pointed out, the outdoor lights were dead.

Even the backup power had been dug up. That succinctly told her just how badly damaged the air base had to be.

Before another tank could turn its gun their way in the darkness, Mariydi accurately fired the assault rifle into the smoke bomb launcher on its side. She could feel the squeezing of her heart when the muzzle flash shined as bright as a reporter's camera.

A Legitimacy Kingdom soldier aimed her way while she was focused on the tank, but the alcoholic man blew that soldier's brains out with his handgun.

The two of them swapped places and rapidly repeated the process.

If they ever fell even a second behind the enemy, they would lose their lives on this hellish battlefield. Again, there was no cover out here. The darkness was no help when the enemy had cutting edge sensors and all the muzzle flashes would reveal their silhouettes anyway.

And those lights were not like the large illuminated signs decorating a safe country city.

Each and every flash was paired with a bullet launched toward a living human.

Surviving here was like being asked to block a real bullet with a phony magic trick. As soon as the enemy saw through the trick, they would be riddled with bullets.

Unable to aim properly with its own smoke in the way, the tank fired its 120mm gun in the wrong direction. It ended up blowing away one of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers instead of Mariydi and Klarheit. Mariydi resisted the reflex to get down on the ground and jerked her chin over to indicate something.

"Look...that's a Zig-27. Hey, what's your job anyway? You said you like to fly with a liquor bottle in

hand, but you aren't gonna tell me you're just a gunner who never holds the stick, are you?"

The drunk suddenly veered away from her.

Her eyes widened.

"Hey!"

"There's a bomber not far from here. If I get that sleepy-head's engine up and running, we can rescue some of the non-pilots too. The cockpit only holds two, but it can hold over 100 times as many if we clear out the bomb bay. They'll probably want to duct-tape themselves to the floor or wall and keep an oxygen tube in their mouth, though."

Mariydi didn't have time to stop him. By the time he was done talking, he was already off toward the slow and heavy bomber. The Rev-51 all-altitude, all-speed adjustable wing bomber had its long main wings flowing back from its fuselage, giving it the sharp silhouette of an arrowhead.

Mariydi watched him leaving in the darkness and sighed.

"I thought he was just some asshole, but he's got a surprisingly good heart," she whispered too quiet for him to hear.

Just then, the drinker was engulfed by an explosion and dust cloud caused by a tank gun.

Mariydi groaned, held her fingers to her temples, and then climbed up to the fighter's cockpit. Without a ladder, climbing the unique streamlined nose was a lot like some quick bouldering. The secretly tearful girl bit her lip and kept her silence.

(This is always what happens when someone tries to be kind. War can be so cruel!!)

She did not have time to move the flaps and rudder for the preflight test. She skipped all that and simply ignited the engine, pushing the Zig-27 forward. Once it began accelerating, it was even faster than a red luxury car.

"Tch. Another headset-style oxygen tube. These things must work a little too well because I'm seeing them everywhere."

The engine's flames were a frightening thing in the darkness.

A tank gun broke through the wall of smoke to aim her way.

She launched all her emergency evasion flares while still on the ground. More and more of the round balls of light were expelled behind the fighter, bouncing along the runway. The bright lights and extra heat sources confused the tank gun, so it fired in the wrong direction.

She had nearly reached takeoff speed.

That was when a Legitimacy Kingdom infantryman launched a personal rocket launcher.

It was a simple anti-tank weapon, so it was not guided. It was likely meant to destroy the runway ahead of her rather than hit the fighter itself. Just like you could stop a train by removing the track.

The asphalt was torn up and more than half of the runway's usable length was taken from her.

She gulped and checked the airspeed gauge. She had not reached 200km/h yet. That was not enough for a stable takeoff with this large air superiority fighter, but she had no choice but to pull up on the stick.

The wheels lifted from the runway, grazing the jagged asphalt at the last second, and then the Zig-27 broke free of gravity. The accumulated lift quickly raised a hunk of metal heavier than a large truck. It might sound surprising, but fighter craft were very vulnerable when taking off. For the pilots who shared their craft's fate, that moment felt as unstable and flimsy as a kite tossed about in the wind.

Nevertheless, she had managed to take off without dying.

She now had the advantage. The tanks and armored trucks may have been unstoppable on the ground, but now she could attack their fragile roofs from the sky. Now was her chance to strike back.

"Ksh. This is Lieutenant Colonel John Foxtrot in Capitalist Corporations Royal Air Force Inc.'s Ground Command Vehicle. With the CT destroyed, we have to skip the formalities, but I can see your signal on the screen. I'm glad at least one of you got out."

"Ice Girl 1 to ground personnel. Raise your anti-friendly-fire cards and hold on just a bit longer. I'll gift these bastards everything I've got hanging from my wings!!"

"That's air-to-air equipment, so don't worry about us. You're from Sky Blue, so you have no obligation to stick with us. Ice Girl 1, do whatever it takes to survive. And I don't mean in the current shoot-or-be-shot situation. Find a more fundamental way to get back at them. Ksh!! Protect the safe country. Save Warsaw. Ksh, so do whatever you need to do. I grant you authorization for it all. This is the final command Royal Air Force's Jotunheim Air Base has for you in our joint operation. I'm glad we had this chance to work together."

“Shut up and stop glorifying your deaths!!!!!! Money is everything in the Capitalist Corporations, so there’s no place for self-sacrifice here. Besides, this disaster is the direct result of me landing here, so I’ll clean up my own mess. Listen, I’m going to save all of you no matter what you say and even if you try to pull rank on me!! So-”

But she didn’t have time to turn around in a big circle and support the air base.

The night sky split open.

And not just in one place. More and more long, skinny contrails were drawn out from the same direction as a shower of cruise missiles poured down on the surface. Mariydi recklessly charged straight into the swarm of missiles, but shooting down just one of them wouldn’t change anything. The entire air base was filled with deadly explosions with the exception of the predetermined evacuation spots known only to the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers.

After that bitter intersection, the dark world was dyed white below her.

Half the control tower had already been torn down, but now the sturdy fortress at the bottom was also obliterated. She hadn’t seen where the command vehicle was located.

These weren’t even FAE. The snooty Legitimacy Kingdom nobles must not have considered the air base worth using their prized weapon on.

But a home to so many soldiers was destroyed all the same.

Jotunheim Air Base was annihilated.

There was no point in providing air support now. And Mariydi herself could not relax either. She released chaff and made a turn to avoid anti-air missiles launched by the enemy troops who now occupied the pile of rubble below.

“Kh.”

She clenched her teeth, but she could not let herself die here.

She did not fear the attacks from the surface, but she no longer had anywhere to land. She was hundreds of kilometers from the closest PMC air base. She didn’t know if her fuel would last that long and she didn’t know what areas were enemy territory or where their anti-air network was located. While she did some swift calculations in her mind, she noticed a dot on her radar.

That wasn’t a missile. It was too big and slow.

Times like this were so irritating when she was tightly strapped in. She turned her head to look back and satisfy her curiosity.

“Hey! You there!?”

She received a transmission in violation of military regulations. It was the same voice she had first heard in her cell.

She clicked her tongue.

“Ice Girl 1 to unidentified craft. How in the world are you alive!?”

“That was a tank gun, remember? An armor-piercing round that fires on a single point. These things happen all the time in the Northern Restriction Zone. If it isn’t a specialized high-explosive round, it’s surprisingly easy to survive even within the lethal range of the blast. And with you gathering all the attention, taking off was a breeze.”

Mariydi heard the roar of an engine very different from a fighter craft.

It came up alongside her.

She now shared the sky with a bomber that weighed more than seven times what her Zig-27 did. Needless to say, this meant Klarheit Rubyhunter had managed to get that 215ton Rev-51 into the air during that frenzied battle. He made it sound like nothing, but his luck may have been greater than Mariydi’s own.

“How many people did you collect?”

“85.”

That may have been a drop in the bucket for an air base of more than 2000 when including everyone from the pilots to the perimeter guards. Big picture, this had been a devastating defeat.

But Mariydi Whitewitch smiled a little with her hands on the stick.

They had managed to save some lives in this battle.

She could just imagine those monsters howling with rage.

“Ice Girl 1 to unidentified craft. ...I won’t let those 85 die no matter what.”

“Call me Oversize. Even if I just made it up.”

“Really? Trying to brag about having a big dick now of all times?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, you dirty girl. I’m talking about the size of the bomber. Anyway, my massive antenna just intercepted a secret transmission. Its encrypted and I can’t tell you what it says, but I can tell you where it was transmitted from. That’s gotta be the Legitimacy Kingdom HQ where they’re sitting back and enjoying the fireworks show they ordered. Ooh, I just found some whisky hidden next to the seat. Ha ha! Guess I’m not the only one who likes stealing a drink above the clouds. Yet I’m the only one who gets in trouble for it. How’s that for unfair, eh!”

“Hold on, what did you just say?”

“Hweh? I’ve got 13 years’ experience as a dancing drunkard, so I’ll be fine.”

“Not about the booze!! Oversize, are you thinking of fighting while dragging that huge ass around with you!? You need to get to safety! Or are you going to get those 85 people killed!?”

“Don’t give me that, girly. Did you forget our final orders from the CT? They knew that was their final moments on this earth. They said they’d changed the radar angle, so those officers would’ve seen the all those missiles approaching the base. They could run a countdown until their death, accurate to the second. But those respectable dumbasses choked down any final message they might’ve had for their families or lovers and suppressed their shaking long enough to tell us pilots we were free to fight. Don’t tell me their determination didn’t reach the heart in that little chest of yours.”

“...”

“C’mon, don’t go soft on us now, Ice Girl 1. Even a drunk like me knows you’re sharper than the rest of us. So use us. Remember, this ain’t a transport plane or a spy plane – it’s a bomber. And you might think of the 85 people in here like precious baby birds you need to handle with care, but every last one of them is begging to be given some way to fight. They’re willing to rush in front of the bullets as a human shield if it’ll get back at the bastards who did this to our base. You weren’t the only one who heard that final order, you know? And a Capitalist Corporations PMC doesn’t need to see the money come in on their bank account before they act. Don’t deny these adults their pride with your childish reluctance.”

Those were the grounded members of the air force.

The personnel the drunk had collected were the businessmen in nice clean jackets and the experts who processed data at a computer on the ground.

For meals they would eat lamb sauté or fish à la meunière in a nice dining hall (because they could

push for living condition improvements in a way the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization could not), so they never had to eat simple rations out of a packet. They were officially known as soldiers, but most of them ended up retiring without ever holding a gun outside of training.

(But I guess a soldier is still a soldier.)

They still had their fangs.

They weren't going to back down after seeing their base obliterated by such a merciless surprise attack.

They knew they were essentially throwing away their lives immediately after having them saved, but they felt they had to do something for their colleagues who had not made it on board a plane.

Mariydi rubbed her thumb along the protective cover at the top of her control column.

"What is that bomber loaded with?"

"250kg of smart bombs and a full set of ASMs. Oh, and listen to this. In a happy bit of irony, I've got a nice big FAE bomb in here. The scary part is how all this is after unloading half its capacity. Hic, and for anti-air defenses, I've also got the machinegun and some shortrange AAMs. Ugh, I could really go for a snack right about now."

"I see."

The idiot appeared to be drinking already, but Mariydi smiled.

There was nothing to hold them down as they flew through the clear night sky with the round moon shining on everything.

She too wanted to do whatever she could to strike back.

"Understood, Oversize. I'll clear the path you need to drop everything you're carrying."

This attack was only the beginning.

With the air base gone, the primary cruise missile would be flying straight for Warsaw.

They needed to strike back before that happened.

Protect the safe country. Save Warsaw.

Do whatever you need to do. I grant you authorization for it all.

Her final order from Jotunheim Air Base was still in place.

Part 4

The Rev-51 bomber was much larger than Mariydi's Zig-27 fighter, so it came equipped with a high-spec radar and computer. Based on its analysis of the encrypted transmissions, the Legitimacy Kingdom cruise missile launchers were divided between three locations. The launcher vehicles were spread out in a fan shape with the HQ sending them orders located at the center.

"Oversize to Ice Girl 1. Which one should we destroy?"

"All of them."

(I really want some hard rock to listen to. I miss my music. Damn, am I not so different from that drunk after all?)

The enemy was aware of their presence too.

When many more dots suddenly appeared on Mariydi's radar, it wasn't because some stealth fighters had blasted their engines to rapidly accelerate.

(Did they reuse the launchers to launch the fighters themselves straight up from the ground?)

She was honestly impressed while she sucked some oxygen in through the tube at her mouth. The use of mobile launchers meant the Legitimacy Kingdom waned to hide their location as much as possible, so they couldn't have an anti-air unit flying around overhead where various types of radar could detect them. But this system gave no thought to the high Gs it would subject the pilots to. Were the pilots considered disposable?

"Damn the Legitimacy Kingdom," said Klarheit. "Did they lure in some drugged-up delinquent soldiers with some kind of extralegal reward? Ha ha! Are their supply crates labeled morphine? Or is it some cocktail designed to boost their fighting spirit?"

"That's hardly funny coming from a guy who reaches for a liquor bottle while flying at Mach 1.4."

The scrambled fighters had created a total of 8 dots rushing toward Mariydi and Klarheit on the radar.

This was the Northern Restricted Zone, so they couldn't expect anything as polite as a transmitted warning and a warning shot demanding they leave this airspace immediately. As soon as the enemy had a lock, the missiles would be flying. Once they were visible, the Hornets would be fighting to the death with their sharp stingers.

"Ice Girl 1, engaging."

"Oversize, ditto."

Mariydi opened up the throttle and flew out ahead of the bomber. Klarheit intentionally reduced his speed to keep his distance.

Both sides now perceived this chunk of the night sky at 7000m up as a hotly contested battlefield.

Again, there were eight enemies here.

They approached head on while sticking in formation.

Aerial battles were all about technology, but superior numbers still gave an undeniable advantage. And Mariydi was restricted by her need to protect the bomber as she fought. In dogfights, you were swiftly shot down if you became trapped and unable to move.

If she fought normally, she wouldn't have a chance.

But she had been trained in the Northern Restricted Zone, so she would never fight normally.

"Attack gun."

With that casual announcement, she fired her machinegun instead of an AAM.

The close-range bullets had almost no chance of hitting a target outside of missile range.

But it could still restrict her opponent's movements

A line of tracer rounds passed just barely off the left side of the 8-craft formation. She didn't have to hit. She just had to scare them into not turning that direction.

The distance between them rapidly shrank as they flew head on.

The first to get a radar lock was Mariydi.

“Attack Bravo.”

(Well, they can only launch their smallest fighters with those launchers, so their radars and such are so much weaker than this large air superiority fighter.)

“Attack Charlie.”

She did not hesitate to press the button on her control column.

An AAM was released from below her main wing and it rocketed through the night sky. Attack accuracy was reduced when flying head on like this, but Mariydi had set something up in advance.

The machinegun fire had restricted the enemy’s evasive action.

And the close formation prevented them from making any sharp turns toward the others in the formation. Unless they wanted to collide with them, of course.

The line of machinegun fire and their allies trapped one of the enemy fighters in place, so its dot on the radar soon blinked out.

“And Attack Delta. Strike.”

But it wasn’t over yet.

She was fortunate to have gotten an attack in before they spread out. The mangled wreckage of the destroyed fighter struck the other fighters flying only a few meters away. The single missile ended up causing a second and third Legitimacy Kingdom fighter to explode.

“Whew!! That might be a new record in cost performance,” noted Klarheit.

“Pay attention. I’m flying straight in, so now they’re going to attack me.”

It was like watching a deadly flower blossoming.

Five fighters had emerged from the wreckage intact and the radar showed them breaking from their formation and flying in large arcs to surround her.

She didn’t even need the radar at this point.

They were probably really after the Rev-51 bomber, but the small Legitimacy Kingdom fighters were

soaring through the air close enough for Mariydi to see them with the naked eye. They were the delta wing style the Legitimacy Kingdom loved so much.

(Hm? Those are a lot smaller than the S/G-31s they normally use. Are these the S Cu-25 interceptors that are built small enough to take off from the highways and have their specs reduced to keep the costs down?)

But Mariydi could not afford to satisfy her curiosity. She took a sharp turn and took up position behind one of the five.

“Oversize, they’re headed your way too!!”

“What, giving me all the glory? Hic.”

The Legitimacy Kingdom’s small S Cu-25s had expected the bomber to be big and slow, so they frantically twisted out of the way. A line of light pursued the fleeing fighters like fireworks. Those were the tracer rounds of the air defense autocannon installed on the Rev-51’s belly.

Each bullet was the size of a hammerhead and more than 3000 were fired every minute. The attack was like a rotating waterfall of light, but it wasn’t enough to bring down a maneuverable fighter.

One of the small delta wing fighters must not have wanted to take damage from an aircraft it considered inferior because it carefully stuck to the bomber’s tail.

That was the most dangerous position to have the enemy in a dogfight.

But Klarheit Rubyhunter seemed to be smiling.

“Whoopsie-daisy.”

With that silly exclamation, he spread the movable wings as far as they would go and pulled the nose nearly vertical. That special maneuver was known as the cobra, something you would have to be crazy to do in a bomber. A fierce mass of air flowed back from the bomber’s main wings, shaking the enemy S Cu-25 with an invisible blow. The fighter temporarily lost its lift and stalled.

Its nose pointed down and it fell in a tailspin.

Delta wings had a variety of advantages, but one disadvantage was how unstable they were when they slowed down to match the bomber. An aircraft that could take sharp turns was also an aircraft that - for better or for worse - easily lost its balance.

"I've got a lot more wing to move the air than your tiny-ass fighters, so get behind me and you might just get a taste of an artificial blast of wind. Have fun in the localized turbulence."

And he was not done yet.

One of the same skinny AAMs Mariydi used was launched from the giant bomber's belly. Modern transport planes and bombers were equipped with counter weapons like that, but they had almost zero chance of actually shooting down a fighter gunning for them.

But things changed when the fighter had stalled and started falling in a tailspin.

Unable to take evasive action, the Legitimacy Kingdom delta wing fighter exploded.

"Attack Delta. Strike...is that the right jargon? Ha ha. I just shot down a fighter with a bomber! I think I'm setting some records up here too."

"Celebrate once it's all over!! Oversize, 7 o'clock and 11 o'clock!!"

"Then it's time for some of that smart combat that's all the rage these days. Ice Girl 1, lend me your eyes and ears."

Mariydi clicked her tongue before silencing an enemy fighter with a missile and then pulling hard on the stick.

The Rev-51 bomber's machinegun and missiles were far from perfect. Its oversized fuselage got in the way, creating blind spots. And with its great weight and slow turning, it couldn't tail an enemy the way a fighter could.

One of the S Cu-25s seemed very pleased with itself after hiding in the blind spot below the bomber's giant left wing, but Mariydi's Zig-27 passed below the bomber and sent some radar waves its way.

"Attack Alpha, Attack Bravo, lock on."

"Got it, Ice Girl 1. Link complete. Ditto on that Attack Bravo."

An AAM launched from the bomber with impossible timing and at an impossible angle. The delta wing fighter that thought it was hiding in a blind spot was accurately caught and blown to smithereens.

Mariydi's fighter had shared its radar lock data with the bomber and the bomber had used that to

launch the missile.

“Attack Delta. Strike,” said Mariydi and Klarheit in unison.

The feature had been controversial with the pilots, but modern technology allowed aircraft to make locks based on ground radar data and even for their missiles on their wings to be launched remotely by a command from an aircraft carrier. The pilot didn't even have to press the launch button.

“Oversize to Ice Girl 1. Have you noticed their weird habit of getting way too close and trying to shoot AAMs? I never could've shaken that one with the blast of air otherwise.”

“What about it?”

“Look above us. They're afraid of the aurora and the magnetic storm. But their cruise missiles worked perfectly over such a long distance, so we know those don't affect their equipment all that much. If they're acting weird because the weather 'might' do something, I'm guessing these are outsiders.”

Of the initial 8 fighters, Mariydi had shot down three in the initial head-on engagement, one had been shot down by the bomber's blast of air and AAM, one had been shot down by Mariydi, and one had been shot down by their joint effort.

Only two S Cu-25s remained.

Mariydi Whitewitch's thumb toyed with the control tower.

“Ice Girl 1 to Oversize. I'll take care of the rest. You prepare for your bombing run.”

“Hang on, are you sure? It'll be 1-against-2 for you. I'd really rather not see our cool blonde lady take a pounding from both ends by two burly macho men.”

Instead of dignifying that with a response, she shot down one of the enemy fighters with machine gun fire as she flew past.

That left just one, so it was 1-against-1.

“Attack Gun. Strike. ...I shouldn't have to rely on a bomber's acrobatic flying in the first place. Just let me do my job.”

“Roger that, Ice Girl 1. Ugh, I should probably take another drink for good luck. No, let's make it two.”

Had this guy mastered the Asian art of the drunken fist to the point that he had incorporated it into aerial combat? Even an ace pilot like Mariydi was astonished by his skill (not that she was ever going to tell him that), so the fact that he did it all while drinking was even more unbelievable.

The Legitimacy Kingdom had to have noticed their attack target by now. But in a one-on-one battle, the last remaining fighter was forced into a duel with Mariydi and could not pursue the bomber.

Meanwhile, the Rev-51 remained steady and began its attack procedure.

“Weapons selection: smart bombs. No issue with wind direction or anything else. Speed and angle within acceptable bounds. Okay, I’m starting. On your mark, standby.”

They shared their targeting data with each other.

The metal and heat sensors revealed the vehicles and soldiers on the otherwise dark ground.

(That’s a lot. They have an entire small camp set up in the forest.)

Well, they had launched more than 100 cruise missiles in a single attack. Those missiles weighed 1.2 tons and were large enough to carry explosives skimming just off the ground. Even with three launch sites, they needed the container-style launchers, spare munitions, cranes and tractors for reloading, an encrypted communication unit, power and fuel supply, a simple barracks and mess hall, and guards. All in all, it may have worked out to a small village.

Mariydi’s monitor displayed the bomber’s ground attack markers. The predicted hit point and the blast range were shown as a red ellipse and urchin-like spikes. Everything along the bomber’s path was covered by the estimated range of the flames, blast, and shrapnel. The line of predicted destruction soon filled her small screen. All of the shapes highlighted in white were covered.

“Three, two, one, shoot. ...No effective countermeasures. GPS guidance is functioning. All bombs following predicted line.”

The actual ground was engulfed in flames just like the monitor had predicted.

The chilly night air of the Scandinavian February was scorched.

Mariydi was 7000m up, so she could not hear the screams of terror and rage from the bastards who had mercilessly targeted a safe country full of noncombatants and launched a surprise attack on the air base standing in their way. But she was satisfied seeing the night’s shadows swept away, the forest’s conifers torn from the ground, and the giant launcher trucks blasted into the air while they broke apart.

“Whew!! Strike check. All bombs detonated successfully! Nice, this is what I call an eco-friendly war!!”

Even in a cutting-edge dogfight where everything was highly digitized, a rattled pilot was still a deadly liability. Mariydi saw the enemy fighter stiffen for a moment when the ground troops were eliminated, so she tore through its engine and delta wing with her machine gun.

“Attack gun. Strike. That’s the last of them. Revenge is so hollow.”

“Hee hee. You sure know how to play the cool ace. I can practically see the smug grin on your face.”

“You didn’t use up all your bombs on this, I hope? We still have plenty of targets left. Woof, woof.”

“You’re having the time of your life out here, aren’t you?”

Part 5

Even if they seemed to have the upper hand, this was a risky tightrope walk. The fact that the bomber was being drawn into dogfights was devastating for an escort mission. But when they were attacked from multiple directions, Mariydi alone had no way of protecting the bomber. Klarheit just had to make up for it with his skill.

(I really wish we could find some more fighters somewhere.)

“Hm, they were flying somewhere near here, weren’t they?”

“Huh?”

“Ice Girl 1 to Oversize. Let’s move on to the next target: the second of the three CM launch sites. And I have one request for you.”

“Oh, that’s unusual. Not just gonna boss me around this time?”

“Your bomber is loaded with flares and chaff for defense, right? Let one of them launch a missile your way on my signal. That will change everything for us.”

“Hey, you aren’t drinking too, are you? I’m the key to this whole operation! I mean, getting me shot down would change everything for us, but not for the better!!”

“That’s why you’re supposed to dodge the missile, you stupid drunk. Listen, do as I say or you’ll regret it later. This is the ant and the grasshopper.”

The Legitimacy Kingdom forces would already know one of their launch sites had been bombed to oblivion. Mariydi's radar screen already showed some new dots. The ground launchers had sent up several fighters while reducing the pilots' lifespans by popping all the capillaries across their bodies.

She detected 6 for now.

Stealth fighters tended to be about evenly matched since everyone designed them similarly, so in the Northern Restricted Zone, people tended to prefer ECM-equipped crafts these days. But an ECM scattering IR and jamming signals also made it hard to get an accurate reading on the numbers and location of the enemy.

Every technology had its pros and cons.

There was little benefit to jamming when too far away for the enemy to get a lock.

Fighters were also being launched from the launch site Mariydi and Klarheit weren't currently targeting. The greater distance created a time delay, but if those joined the others, the Legitimacy Kingdom would have more than 15 fighters.

The Zig-27 was larger and higher quality, so it had the advantage in pure specs. But it would be overwhelmed and devoured by the smaller and cheaper S Cu-25s when there were this many of them.

"Here they come, here they come, here they come," said Klarheit.

"Not yet. Lure them in further. Fly due south from coordinate 147-552 to coordinate 153-552. Your instruments are good, so don't lose your sense of direction in the clouds."

"They're choosing to attack a lot sooner than before! That shows they're more cautious now! I can't show them any kind of opening this time. Fear is the worst trigger for war there is!!"

"I understand all that, Oversize. But this is the threshold."

"Huh?"

"Too much fear works against you. It's like opening an access point for people to manipulate you."

Mariydi tilted her control column to twist her fighter around and make a large turn to the left.

She intentionally moved from the bomber to set things up for the enemy to attack.

“Hey, they’re really sending their radar my way? I’ve got an alert! They’re locked on!!”

“That’s what we wanted. C’mon, get your countermeasures ready.”

This was such a tense moment that Mariydi forgot to even breath oxygen through the headset-like tube.

If the enemy didn’t do what she wanted, they would be caught in the straightforward battle the enemy wanted. There was nothing they could do in a pure 2-against-15 battle. Especially when one of theirs was a bomber.

“Don’t lose your nerve. Get the one at 3 o’clock to launch a missile. If you dodge that, a new path will open up for us.”

“That’s a lot easier said than done, you selfish princess. Here it comes - Defense Bravo!! The missile’s on its way!!”

Lots of round dots of light were scattered like something from a fireworks show.

The Rev-51 bomber had launched its defense flares.

However, that was not a perfect defense. If it didn’t work, the AAM would mercilessly tear open the bomber’s belly.

The semiconductor-controlled explosive drew out a sharp line of white smoke while shooting by directly above the bomber. If not for the flares, its proximity fuse would have activated, blowing away the bomber with the blast.

“That was way too close!!!!!!”

“But it didn’t hit. Provide precise reports, Oversize. Cancel successful. Active.”

“Don’t act like this is easy!! And what does dodging this one missile change!? I’m about to piss myself already!”

“Take it up with your guts and your drinking habit. And if you want to know what this changes, just keep watching.”

Now that he had dodged the missile launched at exactly the timing and angle she had wanted, the battle was theirs.

Overcoming that one life-or-death gamble gave them the cards they needed to safely break through 100 crises.

“I’ve noticed that the Legitimacy Kingdom AAMs don’t seem equipped with a self-destruct device. When they miss, they keep flying until they run out of fuel and fall to the ground, which is pretty dangerous really.”

She doubted they lacked the technology, so it was probably meant to reduce the weight or cost. Fortunately, it created an opening for her.

Simply put...

“We’re at the very edge of their airspace. And if a dodged missile crosses the invisible line on the map, the people in the adjacent area will conclude they’re under attack. Even if it was just those morons in the Legitimacy Kingdom being too cheap for basic etiquette,” explained Mariydi with a mischievous grin. “You see, my Ice Squadron was sent to fly with a different wing since I was a suspect, but if I give those idiots a justification, I can drag them into our fight. And that gives us some more escort fighters.”

New radar waves were released onto the battlefield and several AAMs flew in from the side, obliterating the Legitimacy Kingdom’s S Cu-25s.

Mariydi’s plan had succeeded, but the response had been too quick.

She could guess her squadron had been waiting on the very edge of their airspace, champing at the bit for her to open the door and let them in.

Soldiers could not act just because they wanted to.

Just like everyone at Jotunheim Air Base had risked their lives to give Mariydi the freedom to fly, there was a necessary etiquette for seeking assistance. But now that she had acquired the key, there was no way they could lose.

“Ice Sword 2. Attack Delta. I repeat, Attack Delta. Strike!!”

“Ice Horse 3 to Ice Girl 1. I take it you’re inviting us to join your late-night orgy?”

“Sky Blue Inc.’s Ice Burn 4 here. Aurora Wing’s commander is the boring sort of guy who’s always flipping through the textbooks to check over everything. I doubt the old guy’s even grown any hair down there.”

Their mouths were as foul as ever.

And Mariydi had learned not to get after them for it because they would falsely claim they learned it from her.

A puzzled voice arrived from the bomber.

“Wait, ‘burn’ doesn’t seem to fit the Ice theme very well.”

“Ice Girl 1 to Oversize. We couldn’t come up with anything better. I suggested calling him Ice Pail 4, but he begged me not to.” Mariydi smiled a little. “I’ve removed your collars. It’s a simple job: use the bomber’s smart bombs and ASMs to pay them back for what they did. Care to join us?”

“Ice Sword 2. Wow, inviting us in just in time for the fun part?”

Including Mariydi, they now had four escort fighters, which gave them a lot more options. After all, these were four large and high-quality Zig-27s. Ice Squadron’s fighters could all shoot down the enemy fighters with their AAMs, but so could the slower Oversize with the datalink sharing the interception system and lock data with the fighters.

The maneuverable fighters would get a lock and the bomber would use the superior firepower provided by its greater weight capacity.

The enemy formation was rattled by the unexpected counterattack, so now Mariydi’s team was on the offensive.

The first formation of 6 had been destroyed by the time Ice Squadron had gathered together. Once the second formation of 9 from the further launch site was wiped out, the launch sites were defenseless.

The bomber passed by above the fleeing enemy ground unit and explosive flowers blossomed in its wake. Each one was a mass of scorching heat and shockwaves measuring more than 100m across, so these were the kind of flowers that would blossom in hell itself. Afterwards, they only had to repeat the process.

“Strike check. Oversize to fighters. All bombs detonated successfully. That’s the third launch site gone!!”

“Ice Girl 1 to Oversize. This isn’t over yet.”

They had only been taking out the outer edges of the fan shape.

The HQ that had sent out the coldhearted launch command remained at the center.

They weren't going to show mercy just because they had torn off the HQ's arms and legs. The Legitimacy Kingdom troops had mercilessly crushed Royal Air Force Inc's. Jotunheim Air Base even after knowing they couldn't resist. So Mariydi's team had to thoroughly crush them to pay them back in kind.

"Oversize to fighters. Hey, I spotted something interesting on the ground observation cameras used for the strike check. I'll share it on your monitors."

"Hold on, don't share some gross image. I don't want to see dismembered corpses splattered across the ground by your smart bombs."

"It's not that. Check out this severed arm."

How was that not a dismembered corpse?

This image had come from the high speed camera attached to the bomber's belly. In a newly-cleared portion of the conifer forest, human silhouettes had been caught in the flames after the bombing ignited some gas and ammunition. But Klarheit had drawn a circle around something there.

The uniformed right arm lay there minus the man it belonged to.

But what mattered was the unit insignia.

"Do you know what this means?"

The insignia depicted a large pair of scissors cutting a thick chain. Mariydi groaned unusually loudly when she saw it.

"Goddammit, the Chain Cutters? Everyone, be on your guard!"

"Hic, friends of yours?"

"They're infamous. They handle the Legitimacy Kingdom's dirty work and they made their worldwide debut to rave reviews after learning all the tricks of the trade in the Northern Restricted Zone. They're from the army, but they have no trouble targeting land, air, or sea. Their job is to 'cut' supply lines. They don't care if their target is made up of armed soldiers or not. If someone's carrying supplies that will work against their side, they'll 'cut' that chain even if it's a volunteer group or a medical team. Some of our own Capitalist Corporations soldiers and civilians have fallen victim to them. The ancient Egyptian pyramids can't accept any tourists for the next 30 years thanks to all the landmines the Chain Cutters scattered out there. They did what they came to do, withdrew, and left an estimated 40 thousand live explosives still buried in the sand. Really, it's probably more than that."

“Are their army origins why they hired an outside air defense team that’s afraid of the aurora?”

“Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. So you’re saying these are some bastards well worth killing?”

“Yes. And I said they can handle land, air, or sea, right? This isn’t over. If they brought along the toys they use to cut air supply lines, we’ll be seeing more than just those rentals. Something else is coming.”

That was concerning, but they couldn’t turn back just because of a “maybe”. This wasn’t a pleasure flight where they could leave after giving the enemy a black eye to send a political message. This was a real battle that wouldn’t end until one side or the other was reduced to burning wreckage.

When two sides encountered each other on the battlefield, only one side would return alive.

That was how aerial combat worked. The Chain Cutters had trampled on that logic of aces.

And cowards like that were bound to get creative when their lives were on the line.

So what exactly would they use?

(...)

Mariydi thought while the others sent transmissions back and forth.

“Ice Horse 3 to Oversize. Thanks for looking after our cute commander. Now, I’ve got a question. Is it safe to assume the enemy HQ is really inside that fan shape?”

“Oversize. Their transmissions say so. I can’t decrypt them, but I can tell where they’re coming from. There’s this...synchronicity, would you call it? Anyway, they’ve been talking back and forth with the perfect timing. And it isn’t linked with the launch sites’ actions.”

“Ice Burn 4. ...But that puts it out over the ocean.”

Ice Burn 4 was correct.

They were approaching the Bay of Aegir. The Northern Restricted Zone was famous for its many bays and straits, but this was the “inland sea” located between the north of the European mainland and the Scandinavian Peninsula. It was famous for having become a dangerous tinderbox thanks to all the oil and rare earths located there. The very center of the fanned-out launch sites would take them out over that dark sea.

This sea was littered with a lot of artificial objects.

In addition to the large survey ships and drillships were the offshore oil platforms, ocean wind power plants, solar power plants, and countless transport ships for all the resources extracted from the ocean floor. The Rev-51 bomber's shared data highlighted so much in white that it was easy to forget they were out over the ocean.

But one thing was more conspicuous than all the rest.

"Oversize to fighters. I found it. 50km to 10 o'clock. It's an FSPO."

"A mining megafloat?"

Mariydi cut off her nonproductive thoughts and quizzically joined the conversation.

"Technically no. The Plant Castle is a Legitimacy Kingdom corporate energy complex. Instead of a specialty shop targeted to the individual, it's more like a shopping mall with anything anyone might want." Klarheit Rubyhunter chuckled. "It's all based on the oil they suck up from the ocean floor, of course, but they also have solar panels and wind turbines spread across the ocean around them, making the place look like a huge-ass flower. I don't know when they killed whoever was in charge and stole it from the civilian company, but now it functions as a monstrous power generator larger than a soccer field. Set up an electric-powered toy like a rapid-fire beam cannon or railgun and I bet you'd be able to use it at full specs."

Mariydi was half impressed and half exasperated.

"A stationary cannon? How do they intend to protect themselves from the massive shockwave and radiated heat?"

"I'm sure they have their ways. It might be a makeshift setup, but their lives are on the line here. So maybe they have ablative armor that melts away and keeps the heat off of them. They'd have to replace it for each and every shot, but it was nothing but puny plastic that protected the space shuttles from the thermosphere."

"Ice Sword 2. You must be joking. You mean they're protecting their precious you-know-what with no more than some thin rubber?"

"Ice Burn 4 to Oversize. How can you be sure they're on that float when there's so much artificial crap in this ocean?"

"What, are you not picking up anything on your passive radar? They've been locking onto me for a while now. They're probably using the atmospheric pressure difference to identify and track the aircraft flying through the sky."

Just as Mariydi grabbed her Zig-27's stick again, a lightning-like flash burned into her retinas. There was no way to dodge an anti-air laser beam when it flew at the speed of light. The image she saw burned into the night sky was only the afterimage created by her disturbed senses.

That was not something you could consciously avoid.

And atmospheric pressure tracking used the disturbance her fighter caused in the air itself, so ECMs and jamming wouldn't help.

The Ice Squadron had only survived thanks to the bomber they were escorting.

It had opened its bomb bay just before the laser beam was emitted. An extra-large FAE bomb had been dumped out into the empty sky. That tactical weapon ignited an aerosolized explosive and scorched an area 2km across with ultra-high heat while consuming all the oxygen in the area, but that was enough to alter the atmospheric conditions.

A sharp change in air density caused by a temperature difference could lead to optical refraction, aka a mirage.

Not even cutting-edge technology was magic. It could not overturn a physical phenomenon known about for well over a century.

If the laser had not unnaturally bent just before hitting, someone in the Ice Squadron would have died. And it might have been Mariydi.

"Whew!! Oversize to fighters. If you don't want to die, I'd recommend keeping your heads down and scattering. Atmospheric pressure tracking is easily influenced by obstacles. And don't expect my timing to be that good a second time!!"

"You do know, Oversize, that you're their top priority target, don't you!?"

"Why do you think I need some hard liquor to get through this, idiot? I've dropped quite a few already, but I've still got literal tons of explosives in my belly here. Ain't no way I'm flying sober through anti-air fire when we haven't secured air superiority yet. I don't want to be the grand finale of the fireworks show!!"

The dark ocean was devoid of light.

And it was covered in artificial structures, mostly for oil extraction and mining.

Flying at low altitude was tantamount to suicide, but that was why it was the only path to survival for Mariydi's team. All the impurities in the sea breeze and ocean spray would help refract the lasers

and all the various plants and transport ships could be used as cover to hide from the enemy fire.

“Oversize to fighters. At full power, Plant Castle produces more than 980 thousand kilowatts. That means the float easily supplies as much as a city. But this is the Northern Restricted Zone known for its fjords and the beautiful aurora. They make too much electricity, so they’re apparently having a hard time finding buyers.”

“Ice Burn 4. 980 thousand? Isn’t that about the same as the average nuclear plant?”

“Ice Horse 3. It’s still less than an Object’s reactor, but it would be enough to power one or two of their secondary cannons. Plus, this is the Legitimacy Kingdom’s infamous Chain Cutters. They might have another trick up their sleeve.”

That proved accurate.

They heard something being launched with explosives and several more dots appeared on their radars around the plant. Mariydi initially assumed they had launched more S Cu-25 interceptors with their missile launchers, but this seemed different.

Four fighters were flying in the sky protected by laser beams.

But while still out of range and without even locking on, they each launched two smaller dots from their wings. But these were not missiles. The mystery flying objects flew alongside the fighters for a bit before setting off on their own to surround the battlefield like hounds pursuing their prey.

The previous S Cu-25s had not done this.

The flower of death bloomed and surrounded Mariydi’s squadron like great jaws spreading wide.

“Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. Are these their aces?”

“Ice Girl 1. The enemy crafts are unknown, but those are probably remote-controlled UAVs they sent out ahead of them! Don’t let them get a lock!!”

Mariydi had done this herself.

The Zig-27 fighter and Rev-51 bomber had shared targeting data to shorten the lock on procedure and shoot down an enemy fighter using the bomber’s missile.

Were these unknowns doing the same with fighters and UAVs? Were they following the procedure described in airshow pamphlets for UAV-linked fighters developed as a countermeasure against

stealth aircraft that absorbed or redirected radar waves to vanish from the control tower's screen?

(No...)

She couldn't forget the laser beam from earlier. If one of those short and stumpy UAVs locked onto them, the targeting data would be shared with the stationary optical weapon and they would be immediately shot down.

Now they couldn't keep the laser weapon from getting a lock by focusing on the stationary Plant Castle and using the transport ships and mining platforms as shields. They were dead as soon as the UAVs spied on them from above.

(They're light and they don't have to worry about the G limits of manned aircraft. On the relatively flat ocean surface, we'll have a hard time losing them. No, don't give up. Even if a UAV gets a lock, we can still avoid death if it can't get the data back to the fighter or float. That means chaff or jamming could work.)

"Oversize. Yippee! I just discovered something even worse."

"What is it now!?"

"I can't see what's inside the encrypted military transmissions, but the civilian ones are a different matter. The European air routes are all abuzz. From the look of it, I'm guessing requests are coming in to clear the passenger plane air routes for a military craft that doesn't show up on civilian air traffic control radars. What do you wager the odds are this has something to do with us?"

"Can you tell the overall route being cleared?"

"From Warsaw's international airport to the Information Alliance's Snorri Air Base in the Northern Restricted Zone. They're crossing between civilian and military airspace like it's nothing, so there's no way this is a civilian passenger plane. Probably a secret transport plane. But the routes are already being redirected, so it's going to pass over our heads before long."

Mariydi nearly forgot about the more immediate threat.

This would mean...

"The bombing of Warsaw...wasn't their main objective?"

"The transport plane probably belongs to the Information Alliance. They're the only ones who could safely land it at Snorri Air Base, after all. And they're experts at using charity and propaganda to improve their image to all the families back home. Any other world power and the civilian airports

would be complaining a lot more about a military request like this.”

“Does that mean the Chain Cutters’ cruise missile bombing of Warsaw and attack on Jotunheim Air Base were all so they could target this Information Alliance transport plane? They wanted to alter their targets route to lure it into their ‘lair’.”

Samantha had stubbornly refused to accept the existence of the cruise missile, but not so with the Information Alliance. Unfortunately, they were terrified of it.

“Oversize to Clever Girl. Super aces like us can get by, but how’s a slow transport plane supposed to get past that anti-air laser? It’ll be vaporized by the very first shot.”

“Ice Sword 2. So what’s it carrying that they’re so desperate to get rid of?”

“Ice Horse 3. Probably some VIP’s priceless treasure, like a nightmarish piece of art, a classic car that breaks every exhaust regulation, or someone’s mistress.”

Needless to say, Mariydi Whitewitch was part of the Capitalist Corporations military. The Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance were both her enemy. If she encountered them on the battlefield, she wouldn’t hesitate to draw her weapon and put two bullets in their chest with a quick double tap, so she had no obligation at all to save them.

But.

This was not a 1-on-1 battle. Mariydi could not stand the way those nobles loved to arrogantly pummel a defenseless opponent after making sure they couldn’t fight back. Yes, that was a logical and efficient way to wage war. Mariydi’s great disgust and revulsion with it may have come from being an ace pilot who flew through the sky wordlessly conversing with her rivals who had polished their skills just as much as she had.

That was why she didn’t hesitate.

She was fighting to get back at the Chain Cutters for destroying Royal Air Force Inc.’s Jotunheim Air Base. She did not know what was inside that transport ship, but she knew allowing it to pass through this airspace unharmed would cause great damage to the Legitimacy Kingdom. That was bound to have a greater effect than dropping missiles and bombs on the heads of the enemy soldiers on this “small” battlefield.

“Ice Girl 1. Let’s end this before the unidentified but presumably Information Alliance transport plane enters this airspace. How much time does that leave us? These Legitimacy Kingdom bastards have left their own ideals of chivalry behind, so let’s remind them that there are still storybook heroes fighting out here.”

“Ice Horse 3. I more see this like a quick draw in a Western.”

“Ice Burn 4. Either way, it means you like getting into 1-on-1 fights, doesn’t it? Please try not to do that every single time.”

“Oversize to fighters. If you want to discuss your dreams at the bar, then get moving. I can’t see that plump turkey on my radar, but based on the talk coming from the civilian airports, we have less than 20 minutes.”

A warning icon flashed at the edge of the multifunction monitor and an artificial voice loudly repeated a warning over and over.

A UAV with a long, skinny shape similar to an AAM flew over Mariydi’s head as if drawing out a cross. A normal fighter in that position couldn’t attack because its missiles couldn’t turn fast enough to hit, but that didn’t apply to the UAV.

“Defense Bravo. They have a lock on me!!” shouted Mariydi.

Immediately, she saw a flash as bright as welding light and the nearby oil platform was melted and blown away by the laser beam.

By sharing the radar targeting data, it didn’t matter that kind of obstacle was in the way.

Mariydi only survived because the impurities in the air bent the laser beam ever so slightly. But she wasn’t going to breathe a sigh of relief quite yet. She would be swallowed up by all the rubble if she didn’t soar through at low altitude with a speed more than three times that of a luxury car. The civilian facility was crumbling that fast. She roared with raw anger while flying directly below the platform collapsing like a large surfing wave.

“Damn them!”

“Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. The plants around here are mostly automated, so there won’t be any human losses unless that directly hit the control room where the operator works.”

Meanwhile, the Zig-27s and Rev-51 continued on their way forward.

They lived in the Mach world, so 50km was nothing.

“Ice Horse 3 to Ice Girl 1. What’s our target!?”

“The antennas and other communications equipment. We need to sever the link between the Plant

Castle's stationary laser beam and its fighters and UAVs!!"

Sensing danger, Mariydi raised her Zig-27's nose.

She rose from the ocean surface and entered an attack run that would take her directly above the megafloat that's many smokestacks made it look like a castle floating on the ocean.

(I'm trying to use air-to-air equipment for something it's not designed for. It's one big piece of metal, so I can't lock onto individual parts with radar or IR. I guess that leaves photo recognition, so I'll aim for the conspicuous parabolic antenna!!)

The special antenna was made of a few round plates with a diameter of more than 5m each. They were gathered together like honeycombs or a revolver's cylinder. She forcibly sent the AAMs toward the target. It felt more like dropping them into the air than taking aim and firing.

But it didn't work out.

The missiles burst in empty air before reaching the antenna.

"?"

"Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. They're still active. Something got in the way!!"

That hadn't been a laser beam. She knew that because she hadn't seen the bright light produced when metal was forcibly sliced through.

The enemy had some other trick up their sleeve.

"Ice Horse 3. Freefall bombs don't work either. They detonate before reaching it."

"Ice Burn 4 to Ice Girl 1. Could they be boosting the radar output to deadly levels!? I see Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers fried to a crisp on the smokestacks' spiral staircases!!"

Mariydi's squadron flew by above the Plant Castle.

They descended nearly to the ocean's surface again to avoid a counterattack from the laser beam while they took a large turn to get their noses pointed toward the stationary target again.

"Oversize to fighters. It's probably that radar at the very top. It's normally used to link targeting data with the fighters or UAVs, but in a pinch, they can instantaneously boost its output to create a solid EM barrier. Missiles and even unguided bombs don't work when the fuses themselves

malfunction.”

“Ice Sword 2 to Oversize. Could we destroy it with our machineguns!?”

“Probably not. I’m still waiting for the highspeed camera footage to be analyzed, but that antenna is pretty damn thick. If it has a layered structure and is more than 80cm thick, then it’s as tough as a tank’s front armor. A machinegun sweep isn’t going to tear it in two.”

The target they most wanted to destroy was preventing their attempts. They wouldn’t get anywhere without coming up with a countermeasure.

“Oversize to fighters. I just picked up a nasty transmission from the Eastern Euro Weather Station! If the weather radar is being blocked by the unseen transport plane, then we have less than 10 minutes to go!!”

(How can we neutralize that EM barrier and hit that antenna with a missile or bomb?)

After some thought, Mariydi threw out that idea.

(No, don’t get caught up on that one idea. Our objective is to neutralize the Object-class anti-air laser beam, destroy the Chain Cutters, and let the Information Alliance transport plane pass through here and land safely at Snorri Air Base. We can’t get fixated on the antenna and EM barrier. Remember what war is all about. We’re Capitalist Corporations soldiers.)

“Ice Girl 1 to Oversize. Send me your precious highspeed camera’s footage.”

“What exactly do you want? I’ve got a nice profile shot of your cute face through the canopy.”

“The small UAVs that separated from the fighters. And you said the 85 people curled up inside your bomber were office workers, didn’t you? Connect me to them. I want an expert opinion.”

“?”

A few photos appeared on her multipurpose monitor and she quickly checked the distinctive tail and air intake.

(I guess they wouldn’t have the lot number printed on there for me to see. But these look more like cruise missiles than airplanes. And since they’re from the Legitimacy Kingdom, I bet the Elivan Company made them.)

An explosive roar passed by nearby.

With the laser beam weapon keeping Mariydi's squadron out of the sky, only the Chain Cutters' interceptors were flying there. Their main purpose was to pass targeting data to the stationary anti air laser beam cannon, but they could still fight on their own too.

They could use their machineguns to drive Mariydi higher where the optical weapon would get her.

Mariydi knew she was being targeted, but she did not hesitate to speak.

"Listen, Oversize. Your communication equipment is more powerful than mine, right? You need to launch the magic bullet over the airwaves and outside the Northern Restricted Zone. Send this: 'To Victoria B. Input Number 1502-9163-XXXX-0853 to 6374-0081-XXXX-4517. Start with 1000 and increase if necessary.' "

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just do it. Then we win!!"

An alarm rang in her cockpit.

A Chain Cutter interceptor was targeting her from the sky, well aware that she couldn't counterattack.

"Ice Girl 1 to Oversize. Wake up those desk jockey soldiers. A bomber will be loaded with a huge computer to calculate out the weather conditions and Coriolis force and whatever else needed for accurately dropping bombs, right? Combine that with your heavy-duty communications equipment and prepare to make a cyber attack."

"How!? This isn't the movies! Where are we supposed to find a way into the Legitimacy Kingdom network!?"

"That's easy." Mariydi tapped her multipurpose monitor and it displayed all the necessary information. "I just bought the entire Elivan Company that worked to develop those things. As their largest shareholder, they can't hide their internal data from me."

Mariydi had contacted an accountant she had waiting in a boring safe county. Her command had been to disguise her identity, access the Honolulu market (since that was currently open and located in a blank region that was unofficially affiliated with the Capitalist Corporations), and buy that Legitimacy Kingdom defense company.

A trick like that would be discovered in only a few minutes with a large company closely linked to the military.

But for those few minutes, she could access all of their company secrets as the owner of the company. High speed internet allowed people to steal so much more information these days.

“Wait, the largest shareholder? How much money did you spend on this?”

“People always say I’m a workaholic who doesn’t know how to spend my money, so it just ends up piling up in my bank account. To be honest, I’m astonished I still remember my account number at Victoria Bank.”

She was an ace pilot, after all. She wasn’t on the level of a Pilot Elite, but she saw fighting as her purpose in life and had no real desire to spend the money she made. So just how many zeroes would you find on her bank statements?

“This is how the Capitalist Corporations wages war, Legitimacy Kingdom. We’re the kind of fools who buy bullets with money and then die for money.”

The 85 office workers were still soldiers.

The Rev-51 bomber’s communications equipment and computer were a treasure trove.

Once they had the vulnerability in the UAV network, they demonstrated their specialized talent in deskwork to quickly hack in and neutralize the UAVs.

“Oversize to fighters. The twigs back there want you to know they’ve severed the enemy’s datalink, so the sky is ours again!!”

Mariydi pulled up on the stick and her engine roared to an unnatural extent. Her Zig-27 shot nearly straight up from the ocean surface for a head-on confrontation with the Chain Cutter interceptor leisurely taking aim above.

They passed each other close enough for Mariydi to get a clear look inside their cockpit.

Except there wasn’t a clear canopy to protect a pilot.

She only saw the cold glitter of rounded metal and a camera lens flashing with a complex shutter, so she sighed in disappointment.

“You’re remote too?”

She pulled the control column’s trigger with an icy expression.

Since their enemy was from the army, the pilot was a complete amateur. Worse, they were down on the surface controlling it over the network.

An ace had nothing to discuss with someone so reliant on the machines and the manual. She simply chewed up the enemy craft with her machinegun.

She did not even look back after passing it by. She only heard the explosion behind her as the lifeless weapon was destroyed.

With a lightning-like flash, an anti-air laser beam shot up from the Plant Castle, but its aim was less accurate than before. Laser weapons could be bent using any kind of difference in air density. That could come from a temperature difference, the moisture, the salt density from the sea breeze, smoke particles, or anything really.

All of that could be revealed by the computer the bomber used to calculate where to drop the bombs so they would land within 20cm of their target after falling more than 30 thousand meters. And that information could then be shared with Ice Squadron.

“Ice Girl 1. Let the hunt begin. We’re going to sink Plant Castle,” calmly said Mariydi.

Now it was their time to attack from above.

In addition to the anti-air laser beams, Plant Castle had a powerful radar which could neutralize missiles and bombs by triggering a malfunction in their fuse, but their attacks could get through as long as that couldn’t target them. They chose to use their machineguns and took aim at the large storage tanks that existed on any oil facility.

Several lines of tracer rounds dropped from the sky like glowing dragons swinging their heads.

A massive explosion set the float’s soldiers on fire while dumping them into the ocean. If that was fuel oil, the seawater wouldn’t be enough to extinguish them. The entire facility slanted to one side and a portion of it began to flood. Yes, they could eliminate the stationary laser weapon by sinking the float below it. More than 10 thousand tons of petroleum and gas ignited at once, triggering an enormous explosion. It was enough to form a mushroom cloud over the ocean.

But the enemy was fighting for their lives now.

One soldier took aim with the tube resting on his shoulder even as he burned like a torch.

That was a personal SAM.

“Shit!!”

Tension ran through Mariydi. The accuracy of those missiles wasn't exactly great and it was stopped after crashing into a giant smokestack collapsing from the earlier blast. But shards sharper than nails still poured down on her. A fighter was full of flammable things like bullets, missiles, the engine, and the fuel tank. Even with the armor, a cloud of shrapnel could still be deadly at her speed.

But just before it reached her, a larger form moved in between. That was the Rev-51 bomber piloted by Klarheit Rubyhunter.

"Whoa there."

"What are you doing, Oversize!?"

"That's my line. Don't screw it all up right at the end like that. Then again, this makes you a lot more adorable than if you were just cold and flawless."

The bomber flying only a few meters away had very obviously lost its balance. It was falling. She saw horrific black smoke trailing back from its tail. From her position, she couldn't tell if its automatic fire extinguishing system was working or not.

"Oversize!!"

"Ha ha. This was bound to happen sooner or later. ...Sorry, cough, but the alcohol isn't enough to mask the pain anymore."

"Wait, were you dying from the moment the tank gun detonated near you on the runway?"

"If the 85 people I'd saved had begged me to let them out cause they didn't want to die, urp, I might've hesitated. But those dumbasses said they wanted to fight to the bitter end."

No, the bomber wasn't falling.

Klarheit definitely still had his hands on the stick. He knew he couldn't gain any more altitude, but he was directing the Rev-51's great mass toward the burning Plant Castle.

He took the exact opposite course of Mariydi's squadron as they withdrew up into the sky.

"I'm here to play, Chain Cutters!! You wiped Jotunheim Air Base off the map just cause it was in your way, but my teacher and my friends were there. Agh, not to mention that counselor lady who actually had it in her heart to worry for a worthless guy like me. That base might've been hell at times, but it was also a small village. It was our hoooooeeeeeeeee!!!!!"

Nothing could stop him.

Instead of stabbing straight down into it, the bomber's belly slid along the float's flat surface, scattering sparks everywhere and crushing all the soldiers in its way.

Mariydi was flying through flames and smoke at supersonic speed, so she couldn't see it through to the end. Almost like there was a river flowing between the living and the dead.

And this wasn't over yet.

Why had Klarheit and his passengers aimed there? The answer showed itself soon enough. A new dot appeared on the radar from the giant float.

It was an escape tiltrotor.

Since it had taken flight, Oversize must have just barely missed it. A lot of people had died on both sides, but Oversize's determination had been easily sidestepped by the Chain Cutters' leading members who were now escaping to safety as if sticking out their tongues.

They hadn't learned their lesson. Those people would find new soldiers, train them, rid them of all their morals, and cause further tragedies.

The girl strongly and quietly adjusted her grip on the control column. When Mariydi Whitewitch spoke again, her voice was a low growl.

"Ice Girl 1 to all. That's our top priority. Hunt them down."

But then something unexpected happened.

A white beam of light shot from the burning and sinking Plant Castle to slice through the night sky.

That was the anti-air laser beam.

But it was not aimed at Mariydi's squadron. The optical weapon shot straight toward the tiltrotor and burned through the aircraft as it took off, leaving its panicking and burning subordinates to die.

It was vaporized.

The ending was almost anticlimactic.

Mariydi knew of only one thing that could have manipulated the Chain Cutters' laser beam cannon

like that. Someone must have taken control of a UAV, locked onto the tiltrotor, and given its occupants their just deserts.

“Ksh...this...Oversize...ksh.”

Mariydi sighed.

Her Ice Squadron sharply changed direction and all four Zig-27s flew toward the burning float.

It felt nice fighting to protect rather than to kill.

“Ha ha. I give a dramatic dying speech and then I don’t even manage to die. Anyway, we could really use some additional air support. Fire those machineguns down here to keep those ants from swarming this dropped sugar cube!”

Part 6

It ended surprisingly easily.

The unexpectedly light resistance was likely the result of multiple factors.

The top level of the Chain Cutters had been killed in the tiltrotor, preventing them from operating as an organized group, the Plant Castle float they used as their HQ was sinking, and the Chain Cutters could not allow themselves to be captured by an enemy nation where they would be forced to confess to their past crimes after leaving the Northern Restricted Zone. The diplomatic damage would be too great.

So most of them retreated.

Some were too badly burned to move and others disarmed themselves and used lights or smoke bombs to reveal their location so they could surrender to the Capitalist Corporations, but both those groups were found floating in the cold ocean with a bullet between the eyes or through the heart. Bullets fired by Legitimacy Kingdom guns.

“Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. I only have machinegun ammo left and I won’t have enough fuel to return to base before long. The Capitalist Corporations naval police have collected everyone trembling in the ocean around Oversize. We did our job, so we can leave the ocean cleanup to them.”

“I wonder...”

Mariydi breathed in some oxygen from the tube at her mouth and turned to look at something other than her squadron.

While the four Zig-27s of Ice Squadron prepared to withdraw, another aircraft flew slowly by overhead. It was a large Information Alliance transport plane.

“I wonder what’s in that thing. So many people died on both sides, but that turkey wasn’t even scratched. Even though it’s nearly defenseless and at the center of it all.”

“Ice Horse 3 to Ice Girl 1. We did our job. The rest is someone else’s problem.”

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