

## Chapter 3: The Shattering of the Four-Way Deception >> Tiber District Intervention to Defend the Faith Organization Home Country

### Part 1

It was February and the carnival gave them a leg up. The Faith Organization home country was usually strictly guarded, but at this time of year they had no choice but to throw open their gates and invite in a great crowd of tourists.

This was much appreciated by those plotting to sneak in and cause trouble.

“Okay, let’s do one final check using this board game, Putana.”

“Yes, teacher.”

A cramped room was surrounded on all sides by windowless metal walls. The light hanging from the low ceiling illuminated a brown girl with her long black hair in a ponytail. She wore a green special suit designed to resemble a nurse outfit.

Her name was Putana Highball.

She had been the Pilot Elite for the Faith Organization’s Second Generation Collective Farming and she had converted her scopophobia into a weapon. She was a true monster that sense any “eyes” on her to the point that she could accurately detect a military satellite’s attention from 36 thousand kilometers away.

She had since joined the Legitimacy Kingdom.

The 37th’s potatoes could not have asked for a better local guide.

Quenser, Heivia, Myonri, and Putana sat around a table where a few game pieces sat atop a paper map.

“The former Legitimacy Kingdom thugs known as the Electric Drills have infiltrated their old home country of Rome to have revenge. That holy land contains all the higher ups who kicked them out, so I’m sure they want to go absolutely nuts. We must stop whatever war it is they’re trying to start, so we need to get into Rome too. Without permission, of course. To be blunt, we know we can’t expect the Faith Organization to protect itself after they let those thugs in.”

“U-um.” Jack-of-all-trades Myonri nervously raised her hand. “So these...Electric Drills? We know they have entered Rome, but what are they trying to do there? Not even the best fake IDs would let them sneak a 50m Object into their home country.”

Quenser shrugged.

If they had all the answers, they could have stopped that shady group before they even got to Rome. The Legitimacy Kingdom was playing catch up because they had already lost on the intelligence front.

So they needed to make up for that and get ahead of their enemy.

Heivia tossed a few photos onto the map.

“Episcia Sweetlady. Sex: Male. Age: 29. The moron was captured on a livestream of the parade, so he’s the only Electric Drill we know is in Rome. We have to capture him and get him to talk before they do whatever it is they’re planning. That’s Step 1 for us.”

The delinquent noble was not done there.

In fact, he was only getting started.

“But that isn’t the end of it. The Electric Drills – or really, Bad Garage who leads all those online terrorists – wants to prove their environmental destruction by Objects theory. They want a disaster so bad not even the joint efforts of the four world powers can cover it up.”

“So whatever those thugs are up to in Rome, an Object will be involved at some point. We don’t know how yet, but it will happen.”

“You must be joking, teacher. Rome is a home country with more than 2 million permanent residents.”

“Yeah, and that number goes past 10 million when you include the visitors for February’s carnival. We can’t let an Object rampage through such a densely populated area, so we can’t just chase after the Electric Drills. We need to get ahead of them and stop them. For good. Putana, can you guide us through Rome? Even if the place is flooded with tourists right now, we want to keep a low profile by avoiding any Faith Organization taboos.”

“Of course.”

“That’s all I needed to hear. Let’s get started.”

With that, they approached the double doors at the back of the room and threw them open.

The sunlight that rushed in was so bright it seemed to burn their retinas.

They were greeted by the deep tones of several church bells ringing at once.

They stepped out into a historical city of white stone walls and brick roads. Even the traffic light poles and wireless LAN antennae had been colored to look ancient. The densely-populated area was like a massive open-air museum where every house and store you found was registered as a world heritage site.

This was the Faith Organization's Tiber District.

This was their home country of Rome.

Quenser and the others had changed into down jackets and comfortable pants and they carried traveling backpacks because they weren't just in enemy territory - they were in the enemy's home country. The "room" they had just left was the long metal container on the back of a large truck parked on the curb.

Heivia, who was carrying a thin knapsack sold as a reusable shopping bag over his shoulder, did a double take at the young man who walked past him.

"God damn, that's Rome for you. The guy's listening to a hymn on his phone. Is there a monthly subscription to listen to as many of them as you want?"

"They live in the modern world too. More technology doesn't mean you have to get rid of your faith. Didn't you know phone map apps have a service where they route you through as many church pilgrimage spots as your schedule permits? There is also an AR app that lets you hold up your phone and watch the construction of Rome in fast-forward. Also, try to talk like a Faith Organization person. Avoiding 'god damn' would be a good start."

"Hey, war entertainment is supposed to be our thing in the Legitimacy Kingdom."

"Who various legends and myths belong to is a can of worms you do not want to open. Do you have any idea how many tons of relics there are out there claiming to be part of the Buddha's remains? Or how many lances out there are purported to be the original Lance of Longinus? Roman mythology adopted so much from the Greek gods that no one remembers what it was like originally. One look at the big picture tells you it can't all be true, but every temple, church, and shrine out there insists that they have the truth."

The potatoes knocked on the door to the driver's compartment to greet Millia Newburg of the intelligence division before they calmly joined the crowd of tourists. From here on, they would be following the guidance of Putana Highball who knew the Faith Organization's local rules by heart.

"Hey, Quenser," said Heivia. "I could have sworn we were with the Legitimacy Kingdom. I know we're here on that busy commander's orders, but why the hell do we need to stop this? If the Faith

Organization is going to more or less destroy itself, why not sit back and enjoy the show?"

"How is a noble so ignorant of politics and war? If an enemy home country suddenly falls, the balance between the world powers goes out the window. And the distinction between safe country and battlefield country goes with it. Then we could end up with a chaotic all-you-can-eat buffet of a world war. The Legitimacy Kingdom doesn't want that. Have you checked how close Rome is to Paris on the globe lately? We're right next to each other. We don't want a ton of refugees crossing the Alps to reach us and we definitely don't want to be the Faith Organization's easiest target when they start lashing out for revenge. So we have to stop this to preserve the peace."

With so many people, the tourism business was booming. The street sides were lined with stalls selling skewers of meat or red wine. This was the February carnival, so eating, drinking, dancing, and wearing costumes was the standard set. A marching band and floats covered in decorative lights formed a parade down a blocked-off road. The carnival here didn't feature the samba and bikinis, but it was no less showy.

"Come on, Necleka, Eleanor. The concert hall is this way, so let's go get a photo there!"

Heivia whispered while stepping out of the way of a fried shrimp in glasses leading a pair of twin girls.

"Oh, god. It's her. No one look to two o'clock. It's Sarasa Gleamshifter. Those Valkyries are the divine punishment group of the Faith Organization police, so they really stand out in the crowd."

A woman with short blonde hair and cold eyes wore a skintight black combat suit. The parts worn over it likely provided some kind of muscular support, but they looked more like sexy underwear. This was the Valkyries' home, so they had no need to hide their gear. She was armed with a short-range sniper rifle designed for use on urban criminals. (Instead of shooting an enemy soldier through the head at ultra-long range, it was designed to accurately shoot a criminal and not their hostage at much closer range.) Her presence may have been meant to show security was tight and they would not hesitate to shoot anyone who took the festivities too far.

Sarasa had not made a mistake. Heivia had only really noticed her so soon because he already knew her. Otherwise, he might not have noticed even if she was right behind them.

But that meant they needed to be careful too.

There was always a chance she would notice their familiar faces in the same way.

Putana led them through the crowd, taking a gentle turn to avoid being seen by Sarasa.

They walked through the ancient city at a casual pace while making sure not to bump into any of the passersby. No one questioned their presence here...not even the man who checked to see if he was

being followed so frequently it only drew attention to him.

Putana stared at the man's back and whispered without moving her lips.

"Episcia Sweetlady sighted. Don't worry. His eyes are passing right over us. We have entered his field of vision several times, but he still hasn't noticed us."

"Even a civilian could tell this guy's bad at his job, so you focus more on seeing if any cameras or drones have their 'eyes' on us. I'm more worried about the random tourists than the security at fixed locations and on fixed patrol routes, so let's make our move when the tourists thin out."

After gently toppling a pile of trash to keep ordinary people from following, spreading out some leftover food to distract any animals, and turning the corner into a dark, narrow street, the brown girl gave the signal. Their quarry didn't even notice the sound of the trash.

"We're good. No one is watching. This is a blind spot."

"No Valkyries?"

"None."

"You're up, Millia."

With a screech of tires, a large truck cut across the street to block the man's way and slammed on its brakes. Episcia must have realized something was up because he panicked and tried to turn tail and run, but when he turned around, he found Heivia and Putana had snuck up to him. Those two sent merciless blows into his nose and gut, sending him crumpling to the ground without so much as a scream.

They covered his mouth with duct tape, copied the data from his trackable phone, and threw it out.

"All done," said Heivia. "Give me a hand, Quenser. We need to load this moron into the back of the truck."

Part 2

This had to be what it felt like to run to school with a piece of toast in your mouth.

The Princess was leaning forward inside the cockpit of the Legitimacy Kingdom First Generation Baby Magnum.

She was moving at her max speed of more than 500km/h.

“I’m late.”

“Don’t rush. This is the Faith Organization’s headquarters, so our schedule took into account the likely possibility of a labyrinth of mines and sensors in the ocean. Human error due to rushing is the much greater threat at the moment.”

Frolaytia sounded exasperated in the transmission.

The Princess was trying to enter Rome from the Mediterranean, but there was a problem. Her First Generation was an all-purpose Object capable of most any mission, but its propulsion device used static electricity. It needed to remove its naval floats when moving from sea to land, so the maintenance battalion needed to construct a bridgehead on the coast first.

The Object could resist nukes, but the other ships could not. The maintenance soldiers’ lives would be lost if they hit a moored mine floating in the ocean or triggered a mobile mine that fired a torpedo up from the ocean floor.

So the Princess needed to break through with brute force. She tore the labyrinth apart with her cannons and then used the Object’s own size to trigger the surviving traps, while being careful not to damage the shark anchor that extended into the sea. It was a solution only available to a nuke resistant Object.

And another Object was accompanying her.

The Information Alliance Second Generation was known as the Rush. It was equipped with two rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons, but it was an amphibious air cushion model.

A transmission arrived from its Pilot Elite, the ringlet and G-cups idol known as Oh Ho Ho.

“Ho ho ho, oh ho ho. Hohhh ho ho ho!! I pity you and your ugly low-tech excuse for an Object. Needing to expose your people to danger whenever you need those floats removed sounds like cause to declare it defective, don’t you think? Meanwhile, my Gatling 033 has no need to remove its float. I can charge right up onto land and accept my first place trophy.”

The Princess took a shot with one of her seven main cannons.

The Rush swerved in a sharp S-shape to avoid the low-stability plasma blast and lodged a complaint.

“Dwoh!? A-are you trying to kill me!?”

"I am not receiving a friendly IFF signal, so yes? What are you doing here?"

The Princess sounded casual, but she was actually astounded. She had used the eye movements picked up by her special goggles to make a surprise attack at this close range and that girl had still dodged it. And in a naval battle where the grip with the surface was a lot less stable than on land. Oh Ho Ho seemed like an idiot, but that cutting-edge Information Alliance Object would not be easy to defeat.

But her thoughts were interrupted by dark laughter.

"Oh ho ho. Very well. If you have a death wish, I wouldn't mind a light warmup exercise before rescuing the Faith Organization home countryyyy!!"

"Good, keep it up, Princess. Every shot we take here is a waste of tax money, so rile her up and have her clear the mines for us."

Frolaytia Capistrano made that sound a lot easier than it really was.

Situations like this were perfect for a Gatling-style main cannon's "shoot enough and you'll hit them eventually" philosophy. The Princess only had to evade side to side to get the rapid-fire beam weapons to spray out more than 10 thousand shots a minute. Explosions and sizzling steam could be heard everywhere as the spider web of mines was rapidly cleared away.

"So the Information Alliance decided to join the Legitimacy Kingdom on this one?" noted the Princess. "Rome is a lot more loved than I thought."

"Kh!! How are you still so calm when I'm starting on my third volley!? Oh ho ho. How is this outdated First Generation making a mockery of my high-tech and cutting-edge Gatling 033!?"

"No, please cool your head, my cute little chick! Please realize the Legitimacy Kingdom is using you here!"

If Oh Ho Ho heard that helpful comment from Information Alliance Commander Lendy Farolito, she might actually start to calm down, so the Princess interrupted and spoke over the foreign commander.

"Well, if you're so sure your technology is superior, then the difference must be in the specs of the Elites. Or are you too stupid for even that simple bit of logic?"

"Kiiiiiii!!!!!!"

The Baby Magnum and the Rush approached the Italian Peninsula while repeatedly swapping

positions like they were drawing out the double helix of DNA. All the mines in the way were blown to pieces by Oh Ho Ho's shots when the Princess skillfully danced out of the way. Their expected landing point was the mouth of the Tiber. Once they held that sandy area, the Princess could have her float replaced and swiftly move inland. With a max speed of more than 500km/h, no one would be able to stop her.

"Do you..." started the Princess before biting her lip.

They were both Pilot Elites, so they would both be rendered obsolete before long.

But was that really true? The Information Alliance's Oh Ho Ho was an Elite, but she was also a successful G-cup idol. If Objects were eliminated from the world's battlefields, she might live a glorious life smiling in the spotlight.

She had a way out.

She had a backup plan.

There was a fundamental difference between her and the Princess, who had nothing else.

"What was that? Did you say something? Oh ho ho."

"It's nothing... Now, I have to support Quenser and the others who went in ahead of us."

What happened next was enough to drown out Frolaytia screaming, "What is wrong with you!? That's classified mission information you're giving away!"

Simply put, the Princess added to her statement.

"I don't have time to babysit a little kid like you, so try to behave."

"Djlahgalgh!? L-l-little kid? How do you know about- ah!?"

"?"

"I, uh, I, uh, I mean no! Forget it! Forget I said that!!! I confirmed nothing!! Oh ho ho! That was merely an insult, calling my personality immature, wasn't it!? You would say that to anyone you're upset with, wouldn't you!? So you didn't mean anything more by it! Ah ha ha. Eh heh heh. Oh ho ho. Because what else could you possibly mean by it!? I have G-cups and they are very sexy! There is no deception to be uncovered here!!"

“You’re...happy I was insulting you? Gross.”

### Part 3

When you needed an interrogation done, it was best to call the intelligence division.

Quenser called out to the blonde woman wearing a hoodie and thin pants over a bikini.

“Millia, what is that?”

“What, you’ve never seen vegetable oil before, Quenser?”

His point was how she had emptied a huge 5-liter bottle when she was supposed to be getting useful information out of a dangerous terrorist, but she didn’t seem to notice as she exited the back of the truck and tossed the unneeded empty bottle into a big metal trash can. That kind of trash wouldn’t stand out much with all the meat stalls for the carnival. There were also lots of wooden boxes and hunks of dry ice stacked up in disorderly piles. Rome must not have been much for sorting their trash.

“It’s all about experience. If you’re interested, submit a request for POW training and I’ll teach you the hard way that external pain from punches and kicks isn’t the only way to torture someone.”

Quenser vigorously shook his head.

If he went on a secret date with that sexy blonde where she tied him up and kindly taught him some new things about his body, it might just give him some new kinks to deal with. And while Quenser was interested in just about anything kinky, he didn’t want to find he needed to be looking at a cold drill or pair of pliers for the blood to gather in his lower body.

Millia Newburg didn’t seem to care.

“Myonri and Heivia are out shopping, right? Okay, Quenser and Putana. It’s a little early, but I’ll treat you to a progress report.”

“Huh? Shouldn’t we go in the truck to discuss this?”

“Our shoppers aren’t back yet and you two are about to grab something to eat, right? You’d regret it if you stepped inside that sealed container that reeks of ammonia. ...Damn, I really should have stopped by a drugstore and bought some diapers even if it would have been a little conspicuous.”

“(What the hell happened in there!?)”

“(Teacher, that container is Pandora’s Box. I recommend heeding her warning.)”

Disgusted Quenser and the ever serious brown girl whispered to each other and Millia joined them with a smile. The three of them placed their arms around each other’s shoulders to form a circle and pressed their foreheads together. Needless to say, they were creating a tiny dome where their bodies hid their lips from any possible lip readers.

A dangerous discussion was held in that wonderful dome of sweet scents and girl breath.

Quenser knew he couldn’t tell Heivia about this.

Millia got things rolling.

“First, I have confirmed the enemy here is from Bad Garage. They’ve given up hiding under the guise of some world power’s special forces or intelligence agents, so we can just follow them directly.”

“That’s good news.” Quenser was truly relived by that. “He’s from the Electric Drills who work for Bad Garage, right? What are they hoping to accomplish by sneaking their entire unit in here with fake IDs? They’re supposedly disguised as museum curators, but I doubt they’re only interested in checking out the city’s art museums.”

“SM-510Gi.”

They were close enough for their faces to look blurry to each other, but Putana clearly frowned in confusion.

“That’s a model number for a vehicle’s electronic lock. A Faith Organization model.”

“You really learned your stuff in Lost Angels, Putana. Specifically, it’s a model used by the partially state-owned Sol & Mani Autos, which makes most Faith Organization military vehicles. The Gi at the end means it belongs to a large cargo model weighing at least 10 tons. Since he had the decoder for one, his job must be to unlock and steal a vehicle like that. Probably 60-70% of the trucks driving in Rome would fit that profile.”

“But why?” asked Quenser mostly on reflex, his forehead still against theirs.

Were they going to steal a truck in the city since they couldn’t get one past the highly-secure front gate? To carry something? But if they sent their people in and stole an empty truck in Rome, they would have no way to load the cargo they had left outside. A 10ton truck could be a deadly weapon in and of itself, but if the Electric Drills saw themselves as professional soldiers, they would have snuck in more convenient weapons like guns or bombs.

However, three seconds passed without a response. Quenser frowned.

“Wait, Millia. Don’t tell me you got a little too ‘carried away’ before getting everything out of him.”

“Non non non!! He was admittedly weaker than I thought and I didn’t expect him to curl up in the fetal position like that, but he isn’t dead! Yes, I got a game over, but I still have a continue left! I’m a pro, remember? I’m offended you don’t trust my skill.”

“Are you sure? You didn’t get overeager and take off a hand or a foot or something?”

“I would never! Cut off something like that and they’re in too much pain to torture properly!”

“Teachers, you’re making the Geneva Convention weep with this conversation.”

Quenser felt Putana’s sweet sigh on his face, but he didn’t have time to enjoy it.

A metallic noise interrupted. He could only compare it to something comical, like a thick wok’s curve being bent the other way. And the side of the truck’s container now had a thumb-sized hole in it.

Just as Quenser realized that had been a long-distance sniper shot, Putana and Millia were both tackling him to the ground.

“Hwa ha ha! Am I finally getting the popularity I deserve!? Has the carnival gotten you to open up enough to express how you really feel!?”

“Have you gone insane with panic, teacher!?”

“The opposite, I’d say. What did you learn in Lost Angels, Putana? You know things are dire when this perv seriously addresses the crisis before his eyes.”

The lovely brown girl and blonde young woman dragged him into the shadows. Specifically, below the truck which stood well above the ground.

There was no second shot.

And not just because their swift reaction hadn’t given the sniper a chance. In fact, the initial sniper shot had been odd in a number of ways.

“What was with that first shot? Why the truck? Whoever they were trying to hit, I can’t imagine why they wouldn’t aim for us directly while we were chatting outside.”

“Putana, did you sense the enemy’s eyes on us?”

“...”

Millia’s quick question belatedly clued the brown girl in.

Putana hadn’t been alerted before the shot. That meant the sniper could hide from even Putana Highball’s nearly psychic level of scopophobia. But if they were that good, it was unthinkable that they had screwed up and missed.

They had missed for a reason.

No, they wanted to hit the truck. That shot had been successful.

After a moment, a commotion grew around them.

“What was that? I just heard a really loud noise.”

“Wait, does that truck have a hole in the side?”

“Th-that was a gunshot!! A parade bottle rocket wouldn’t leave a hole like that!!”

“Damn,” grumbled Millia below the truck. “A spy is only useful while hidden. Especially when holding a hostage to torture while undercover in the enemy’s home country. If the Faith Organization police open that truck, we’re done for. And someone set this up so that’s exactly what happens.”

“So the Electric Drills are letting their captured member escape?”

“Do you really think that terrorist is going to have a good time after the Faith Organization police find him? You have it completely backwards. This was probably an Information Alliance or Capitalist Corporations dog! They would rather reveal our prisoner to the authorities than give the Legitimacy Kingdom the credit for capturing him. Unfortunately, their method of choice is quite effective!!”

“Teacher, the normal police are bad enough, but that divine punishment group will pick up the scent eventually. We can’t let the Valkyries get their eyes on us.”

“Oh, c’mon. If we’re after the same enemy, why can’t we just get along!?”

Part 4

Three triplet sisters who were infiltrating Rome giggled while nestled together atop one of the church belltowers that grew from this city like bamboo shoots.

“Dry, I think they’re onto us.”

“Don’t, Sweet. That one shot was enough. We can’t get greedy here.”

“Dry, Sweet. Dismantle your sniper rifle. We need to withdraw while we still can.”

## Part 5

Quenser clicked his tongue and reached out from under the truck. After feeling the pain in his fingers, he grabbed a piece of dry ice presumably thrown out by a food stall cooking up fresh fish. He used a cooking knife about as short as his thumb to cut a hole in the radiator pipe to sprinkle the coolant water on the dry ice.

White steam that would obscure the vision of the harmless crowd spread out from below the truck.

“Whoa!?”

Hearing a Faith Organization police officer cry out while slowly approaching the truck, Quenser and Putana crawled out from under the truck.

Several dry gunshots rang out right next to them.

Quenser looked over in surprise to see Millia sending a horizontal line of bullets into the side of the truck, pulling the pin from an incendiary grenade, and tossing it into the driver’s compartment.

“We’ve gotta cover our tracks! We aren’t supposed to be in Rome!!”

“Ugh, and that means killing the hostage?”

“Teacher. You don’t sound all that bothered by it.”

The truck was convenient, but it had always been meant as a temporary thing. They had to leave it behind now that it was time to abandon it. They contacted Heivia and Myonri via radio while quickly vacating the area. The grenade must have ignited either the fuel tank or pipe because they heard a much louder explosion behind them. It caused less of a commotion than expected, perhaps thanks to the tens of thousands of firecrackers and bottle rockets set off during the parades.

Quenser yelled to the others while hiding among the crowd costumed in masks and cloaks.

“Putana, you be on alert for snipers or the Valkyries. Millia, if there’s anything you’ve been keeping from us, you need to tell us now!!”

“Why do you make me sound like the bad guy here?”

“If we get into trouble and nearly die because you forgot to tell us something, I’m giving you a spanking.”

Millia Newburg looked exasperated while she flipped her reversible hoodie inside out to change its color.

“I honestly don’t have much more information. Only a list of radio codes, I guess. The Information Alliance code is probably the one used by the Electric Drills, but he also had a decryption program for a Legitimacy Kingdom code. I don’t know who he hoped to contact using that, though.”

Quenser came to a stop.

Putana and Millia looked puzzled, but he had some extra information he had obtained with his own two feet.

This was not his first time dealing with a Bad Garage group.

In other words...

“Stick that tight ass out my way, Millia.”

“Now really isn’t the time for that, Quenser!”

“Dammit. They have a Legitimacy Kingdom group too: the Chain Cutters! Come to think of it, we just kind of assumed they were dead and didn’t actually count their bodies or anything!!”

“Teacher?”

“Bad Garage used the internet to corrupt and recruit a Legitimacy Kingdom unit. And that godawful unit ignored their orders and fired a ton of cruise missiles in the Northern Restricted Zone. ...This is bad. Are they going to fire hundreds of missiles into Rome like that!?”

He heard a deep sound like several tremors occurring at the same time.

Those were sirens.

This was an air raid warning. But did all the Roman residents and tourists really understand what that meant while they were trying to enjoy the carnival? Some assumed this was part of the parade or some other event, so they threw their hands in the air, smiled, and shouted back at the disaster speakers. A lot of the others simply aimed their phone cameras at the speakers.

A Faith Organization radar station must have detected something, but they could not get through to the ordinary people out there.

The Chain Cutters had to know the Electric Drills, another Bad Garage group, were in Rome. Were they willing to blow away their own allies if it would achieve their goal?

Then it happened.

At first, Quenser thought he was seeing giant smokestacks like those found at an industrial complex. The thick metal extended more than 100m into the air. The high-rise structures looked horribly out of place in Rome since it was known as a citywide museum where individual houses and shops were selected as world heritage sites.

He thought this must be a giant cage surrounding an especially-large temple in the center of Rome.

But it was not.

They slowly slid to the side. They were moving. They had left standby mode and were taking up the optimal position to physically eliminate the incoming threat.

“Those are the defense Objects used to protect Rome,” explained Putana Highball while watching the distant movement.

There were seven of them.

And if these were the direct defenders of their home country, they would be the best of the best.

That girl had once been a Faith Organization Pilot Elite, so what did she see when she watched those 7 smokestacks...no, those colossal main cannons. Even now, the 7 Objects were moving to the outskirts of Rome. They were like a giant flower blossoming to fortify the city's defenses in each direction.

There was envy, jealousy, and even pure terror in Putana's voice as she continued.

“Septimontium. Those are the ‘seven hills’ that protect Rome, teacher.”

## Part 6

The sky was dyed pure white.

A total of more than 200 cruise missiles were all shot down in an instant.

## Part 7

Out at sea, the Princess had stopped the Baby Magnum one step away from the Tiber's mouth. The Rush stopped alongside her even though they technically weren't allies.

Two or three of the many explosions were of a different type than the rest. The Princess could tell the difference since a First Generation Pilot Elite's missions often included shooting down missiles.

(Those were FAE warheads.)

She stared through her special goggles. The flammable aerosol must have burst before spreading out enough because the explosion was small and simply resembled a somehow sticky flame.

Had they hidden their precious FAE missiles among the many ordinary ones to reduce the odds of them being shot down?

Not that it mattered when all 200 missiles were shot down at once.

Septimontium.

The Faith Organization tended to name their Objects after gods, so they must have seen those seven hills as sacred. Or had a faction wanted to make their land seem sacred by naming an Object after it?

The monitor capped the brightness of the footage it showed her, but the Princess still felt a pain in her temples.

But the loud signal noise was even worse.

"Ksh, kssssssshhhhhhhhh!! Prin...cess. Commun...check. Ksh!! ...an eye...your surroundings...kssssshhhhhhh!!!"

"Kssshhh!! This is...ksh...the same laser...as the...!!"

(No, this isn't lasers. To cause this much interference, it must be plasma or some other kind of beam.)

“Oh ho ho. The answer is laser beams.” Oh Ho Ho rejected her idea over an unusually clear transmission due to their proximity. “Rapid temperature changes and vaporizing the moisture in the air can cause signal interference. Do not be deceived.”

Apparently the unexpected attack had not been aimed at the Princess and Oh Ho Ho approaching from the ocean. The shot passed by well above them.

And that had seemed to dye the blue sky white.

But they were not actually seeing the laser’s own light. They could only perceive the afterimage created by burning the dust and moisture in the air.

The number of beams fanned out at a high density had to be more than ten thousand. Instead of aiming at the enemy and targeting a specific point, they used a massive wall to tear through the entire space. It looked like the 200 cruise missiles had been hit, not any kind of aircraft, but it was still astonishing to see. The Faith Organization had responded faster despite being further inland than the Princess and Oh Ho Ho. They knew exactly what that meant: the Faith Organization’s radars were vastly superior to theirs.

A dull rumbling followed.

It came from near the Tiber’s mouth. Several colossal structures slowly moved along set paths. An Object’s reactor and cockpit were contained within giant main cannons standing more than 100m tall.

They really were colossal gun emplacements at that point.

It was unlikely a single cannon could produce such a high density of laser beams. The sides must have been covered with smaller openings that could fire their own beams.

They now slowly bent and tilted to take aim at the Princess floating on the ocean.

Oh Ho Ho actually sounded impressed by the overly simple concept.

“A railroad? Are they actually moving Objects along metal rails? Oh ho ho. Those idiots! Is the Faith Organization completely insane!?”

“They have found a loophole.”

Once, there was a plan to bury a JLevelMHD reactor below a city in the Northern Restricted Zone to supply power for its 5 million residents. They had also placed several layers of stationary cannons around the city, providing them with solid defenses. ...Which was why the attacking Object had no choice but to slaughter all five million civilians living in the city to blast deep enough. That tragedy

was the reason behind the one area in the world where Objects were banned.

To avoid the same taboo, Rome insisted they were using mobile Objects instead of stationary cannons. Of course, Objects that could only move along metal rails at the speed of a scooter could not keep up with a high-speed Object battle.

They had to win in a single shot.

They used their wall of more than a million laser beams to tear through the battlefield and the enemy Object, slaughtering any enemy, whether they were alone, in a group, manned, or unmanned. They had created a literal defensive line that was impossible to avoid, defend against, or strike back at.

Their seven hills created the perfect seven-Object system.

By surrounding Rome from seven directions and using their deadly wall of nearly 10 million lasers to repel any enemy with brute force, they had created a true sacred ground.

And in that case...

(The Faith Organization isn't all they're cracked up to be.)

The Princess sighed while reaching that conclusion.

Whether they had noticed or not, a radio transmission arrived from the coast.

"This is Viminalis 02 of the Faith Organization Home Country Defense Force. Unidentified Objects, please respond. If you do not, we will assume you are hostile and attack. You have already entered our territorial waters and violated our sovereignty."

"What should we do?" asked Oh Ho Ho.

"I am not here to battle them," replied the Princess while considering a few attack options. "This is the Baby Magnum of the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. We have discovered a critical security hole in your defenses and you have ignored our advice on three separate occasions now. Are you aware of this?"

"You mean your plan to cancel the carnival and hold a mass evacuation of our home country's residents? I assumed those messages were meant as a provocation."

The response came with a snort of laughter.

Attackers were always thinking up new methods, so if you weren't willing to consider the unlikely, you made for a poor defender. If you truly understood that the residents of a world power's home country and all its tourists lives depended on your actions, it was best to take seriously even what sounded like a drunk's bad joke.

"This is an important group ritual for the Faith Organization, so we have a duty to keep the event running smoothly. Why would we listen to outsiders like you?"

"If you do not comprehend the threat, then you have no right to obstruct our actions. Now, I will translate that into terms simple enough for even your feeble mind to understand: get lost, you worthless excuse of an Elite."

"Hostile intentions detected. Now you don't get to complain when I blast you to kingdom come."

Someone panicked when she heard that: the G-cups idol Oh Ho Ho.

"W-wait! Oh ho ho. Why does it sound an awful lot like you're picking a fight with them!?"

The Princess expressionlessly stuck out her tongue.

"I am not here to battle them, but I have no choice if they insist on it."

"Y-you stupid Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes!! Is everyone in the 37th like this!?"

"Fortunately, the Septimontium system has a loophole."

"?"

How was she still confused?

Now the Princess felt guilty for expecting her to understand. Oh Ho Ho really needed to remember the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance were not allies here.

So the Princess just came out and said it.

She slid a bit to the side, silently placing the Baby Magnum behind the Rush.

"They attack with a solid wall meant to destroy everything in its path, so if I use you as a shield, I can rush in and attack them before they can charge up their next shot."



above. The Princess selected weapons for her seven main cannons. She set the odd ones to low-stability plasma cannons and the even ones to laser beams. The trick here was to fire the plasma first but have the faster laser beams hit first. And the wall of heat from the plasma would bend the light in ways the enemy would have trouble predicting.

“I hope you die a multitude of deaths so everyone can see your pathetic corpse!!”

“Oh ho ho. Your mother must be so ashamed.”

That slow Second Generation could only move along its metal rails, but it was doomed either way. If it followed her main cannon’s movements and responded to the first ones to fire, it would attempt to avoid the low-stability plasma cannons. Then the bent laser beams would burn right through its 100m main cannon.

And a split-second before precisely that happened, something unexpected occurred.

Part 8

Quenser’s group had lost their truck-based mobile base and they were now being pursued by Faith Organization police, but what they needed to do and where they needed to go remained unchanged.

“To Rome’s outer gate!! The big main gate that trucks weighing more than 10 tons can fit through!!”

“May I ask why!?”

Millia had a reason for yelling to Quenser even though she preferred covert operations and was right next to him.

A deluge of voices that were definitely not cheering rattled all the windows in the area. The tourists hadn’t been shaken by a truck blowing up, but this they couldn’t pretend was part of the parade or another event.

Quenser caught some glimpses of Valkyries in their black combat suits with add-ons resembling sexy underwear, but those police special forces were meant to protect the people of the city and couldn’t fight their way through the crowd to reach the spies. Quenser let the crowd carry him as he spoke.

“The Chain Cutters launched hundreds of cruise missiles and the Faith Organization shot them all down with their secret weapon...the Septimontium, was it? The Faith Organization is probably mighty pleased with itself, but Bad Garage expected that. The plan was for the missiles exploding in midair to send the crowds into a panic! Including the tourists, that’s more than 10 million people, right? Get that many people running around in a panic and the ordinary security system entirely breaks down!!”

They had already learned the Electric Drills had a device meant to unlock a SM-510Gi, an electronic lock for a large truck they presumably intended to steal.

Quenser could easily predict what the future held now.

“Their main force is waiting outside of Rome. That’s probably Bad Garage themselves.”

He was careful not to be swept away by the crowd, but he did not stop either.

The situation was pressing.

“The cruise missiles were bound to bring chaos whether they hit the city or were shot down. As the fearful people try to leave Rome, security at the gates will cease to function, which means this is their chance to break through the gate and enter Rome with their truck or whatever!!”

“We can discuss what their cargo is later, but it’s suicide either way. Maybe they can slip past the human eyes, but the gate has countless cameras and sensors. Even if Bad Garage uses the chaos to break through, the make, model, and number of their truck will be known and the authorities will catch up to-”

Realizing the flaw in her reasoning, Millia trailed off and Quenser continued for her.

“Which is why they’ll switch to a new truck as soon as they’re inside. Truck A used to break into the city will be marked, but they just have to reload their cargo on Truck B prepared by the Electric Drills and they can vanish into the city. Then they’re free to move around Rome with whatever secret weapon they have!!”

“May I ask a fundamental question here, teacher?” whispered Putana, finding two young siblings who had apparently been separated from their parents and guiding them toward the wall where they wouldn’t be swallowed up if the crowd started to collapse like dominoes. “What exactly is this secret weapon?”

“...”

Quenser had no answer.

He had predicted so much, but it wasn’t enough to catch up with the Chain Cutters and Electric Drills. Their leaders in Bad Garage were still at least a step ahead of Quenser.

He heard a vehicle honking loudly behind him.

He looked back to see Heivia driving a humongous fire truck he had gotten from who-knows-where. When the truck passed them, Quenser's group hopped onto its side like it was a tram. It continued down the chaotic Roman street with them onboard.

This would let them escape Sarasa Gleamshifter and the Valkyrie special forces.

Myonri reached down from the top of the fire truck.

"It's a pretty bumpy ride! If you aren't confident in your grip, it's safer to climb up to the roof!!"

"Thanks, Myonri. I'm giving up first!"

Everyone knew Quenser was scrawny, so he gave up before the girls. Pretending to be stronger than you were would get you killed in war, so he grabbed Myonri's hand and crawled up onto the roof.

(Bad Garage wants to prove the environmental destruction by Objects theory. That means they want this to end with Rome being obliterated by an Object-created disaster. But what are they bringing into the city to do that? It has to be small enough to carry on a truck. I doubt they actually have dozens of trucks carrying all the dismantled parts needed to construct an Object inside Rome. That would take months undercover here.)

"No, wait."

"Teacher?"

"Damn, so that's it. They only need the one part. They don't have to construct the whole thing!!"

Putana climbed up on her own and tilted her head with her black ponytail whipping in the wind. Unfortunately, now was not the time to adore how cute that was. Quenser cautiously moved to the front of the fire truck and kicked the roof of the driver's compartment with his boot heel to get his partner's attention.

He was practically on top of Heivia, but he still shouted into his radio.

"Heivia!! What underground spaces in Rome could you directly drive a 10ton truck into? It has to be at least 60m deep!!"

"Do you have any idea how many millions of people there are crammed into this tiny area of land?"

"Including the carnival tourists, over 10 million."

"Your adoring student is right, Quenser. Everything looks all fancy and they insist on preserving the scenery, but that makes it really hard to do any construction and they're forced to keep all the ugly and dirty infrastructure underground. Really, just driving into a subway tunnel would be enough to meet your conditions, so what's your point!?"

"Bad Garage's win condition is destroying Rome with an artificial disaster caused by an Object and they're willing to do anything to accomplish it."

Quenser briefly paused for a deep breath.

And he attempted to explain once more.

"So what could that artificial disaster be?"

"The first things that come to mind are an earthquake or volcanic eruption. Because an Object's weight and footwork have a negative effect on the earth's crust." Millia must have been confident in her grip because she remained on the side of the fire truck while she gave her casual response. "And luck would have it Mount Vesuvius is located on the Italian Peninsula. It's one of the world's most famous active volcanoes, right alongside Mount Etna, and it's only about 200km from the center of Rome. Mineral springs are fairly common around here, so there is a chance the same magma reservoir exists below the city. It's currently dormant, but the kind of massive energy that destroyed Pompeii in a single night still lurks below the surface."

"I had the same idea," said Quenser. "Bad Garage just has to artificially trigger an eruption. And no matter how cheap an argument it is, they'll consider it a win as long as it counts as Object technology causing an earthquake or eruption. That means they don't even need some brand new secret weapon. Existing tech is more than enough to pull that off."

"Um, Quenser? You aren't saying what I think you are, are you?" asked Myonri on the fire truck roof, hoping he would reject the idea in her mind.

Unfortunately, he couldn't do that. He was forced to confirm it.

"An artificial earthquake."

"..."

"Long ago, an underground nuclear test apparently caused a malfunction in the seismographs installed on the surface, recording it as a magnitude 5 or greater. So it should be possible. They don't even need a whole Object. If they carry the high-powered JLevelMHD reactor in on a truck and detonate it deep underground, they can affect the magma reservoir linked to Mount Vesuvius. Then that magma will burst up from below Rome and submerge the city in an orange hell!!"

## Part 9

Simply put, the enemy avoided the Princess's surefire attack created by combining low-stability plasma cannons and laser beams. The Viminalis 02's action itself was simple. In fact, it was so simple that she had ruled it out as a possibility because it was meaningless.

The small reactor emerged from the base of the 200m cannon.

"Wh-what!?" shouted Frolaytia.

A sphere less than 10m across was suddenly ejected. It had six parts similar to insect legs that braced themselves against the ground and used the giant cannon as a shield to escape the Princess's laser beams.

Maybe it was a weapon and maybe it was a balancing weight, but a long tail-like part swished side to side at the rear of the sphere.

"Oh ho ho. Am I dreaming? Did that Second Generation abandon its armor to prioritize evasion!?"

"This is nothing more than suicide."

The Viminalis 02 must have had special springs installed in those legs because it took quick, zigzagging evasive actions accompanied by a deep sound like a thick steel plate being sliced through. Amazingly, it continued to accurately avoid the Princess and Oh Ho Ho's attacks. Its armor couldn't have been more than 3cm thick. A single hit would cause it to explode, but that single hit never seemed to happen.

"Oh, no," said the Princess.

The Object was only a reactor and cockpit now, but it could still use the engine that had supplied so much energy to a main cannon larger than an industrial complex's smokestack. The Princess had feared another deadly slap if it had time to charge back up and enough time had already passed for that.

Now that the reactor had separated, she didn't know if the next attack would also use laser beams, but she knew a second attack was coming. And the odds of death were even higher than before since she couldn't predict what would be coming her way.

Time seemed to slow.

And finally stop.

In a cockpit where she couldn't even trust her own heartbeat and death felt like it was physically approaching, the Princess watched the unusual situation with a weirdly detached perspective.

And a moment later...

"Huh?"

"It's running away."

Those dumbfounded comments from Oh Ho Ho and Lendy brought the flow of time back to normal.

The Viminalis 02 used its springs to leap back. It may have settled on a change of plans while contacting the other Objects because it gave up on the naval threat and rapidly withdrew toward the center of Rome.

Only after it vanished beyond the horizon did Oh Ho Ho speak up.

"Th-that was anticlimactic. Oh ho ho. Did it turn tail and run after concluding it couldn't defeat us?"

"Oh, no," said the Princess, ignoring the other Elite.

They could not celebrate yet. Their Object landing and artillery support mission had been designed to prevent exactly this from happening. Since they had failed to hold the large enemy's attention, they had to assume their plans had gone awry.

Everything would fall apart if they didn't fix this and fast.

Or in other words...

"Quenser and the others are in Rome. If all 7 of them shed their armor for mobility, Quenser's group will be surrounded and ganged up on by Septimontium."

Part 10

Some kind of shadow fell on Quenser's group.

The battlefield student looked up without thinking because he still wasn't fully used to being at war.

The world's smallest Object dropped like a shooting star.

“Huh?”

“Teacher!!”

Putana tackled him out of the way just before an attack from above separated the fire truck’s front and back halves as it raced down the street. There was no sound. The slash was met with no resistance at all, like a taut electrically-heated wire melting through a foam material.

But Quenser didn’t have time to question it. He and Putana were thrown toward the asphalt which was rushing by like a belt grinder.

“Gahhh!?”

It was truly no more than coincidence they didn’t end up dead. Just before they struck the pavement, they slammed into the soft wall of a tent-style food stall set up on the roadside.

They heard a sound like straining steel muscles.

There was at least one of the things on the same road as them.

When Quenser looked up with Putana in his arms, he saw a few more round shapes on the roofs of the cathedrals and apartments lining the road. Something like a long tail swished gently behind them and six sharp insect-like legs supported them. He could guess these were Object reactors with the bare minimum of a cockpit attached.

“There are more than one? Are they Septimontium!?”

They prioritized evasion over all else, so a single hit would mean instant death. The design was absurdly specialized.

All the energy produced by the reactor was focused on the triple electrodes sticking out from the front of the round body. That was pure electrical energy. That fearsome white light could probably instantly blow apart a bank vault door with only a light touch.

He thought those were electrodes like on a stun gun.

But he was mistaken.

“Those are the prongs for a power plug. That’s the plug used to send power from the reactor to those colossal main cannons, but they’re just using it as a weapon.”

“Did they design more maneuverable Objects so they could operate them in the city?” Putana looked like she had wandered into a nightmare. She might have been more sensitive to this since she used to be an Object Pilot Elite. “No, if they were only meant to protect their home country from external attack, they would have been designed to keep the enemy out of the city in the first place. That means their ability to attack within Rome wasn’t designed to defeat an external foe. They were built to attack the Faith Organization’s own people. That threat was used to scare the people into behaving, thus giving them peace of mind.”

“This is the Object’s other role. The world’s strongest internal discipline weapon.”

Instead of just providing physical attack power, it mentally bound the people with fear, ensuring they would submit.

In a way, it was exactly the kind of oddity you would find in the Faith Organization that focused so much on people’s beliefs. And a system that accepted every form of belief into a single organization would require a system to avoid infighting. A monotheistic believer could not accept the existence of any other gods, after all.

So they ruled with an iron fist to ensure their organization didn’t collapse.

So they prepared the insurance needed to fix things if it did collapse.

Those things would not hesitate to kill you even if you fled down a narrow alley, shut yourself up in a small building, or took a good person hostage.

They would blow away everything in the way even if you hid inside a historic cathedral or used one of the many world heritage sites as a shield.

Their insect legs inspired disgust in everyone who saw them, their tails moved in way that felt too emotional to be a machine, and their horrific weapons executed their targets with a direct touch of a high-voltage current so great it caused them to explode. Everything about these Objects, including their size and shape, had been designed using the science of fear.

Come to think of it hadn’t lightning become a symbol of divine punishment in the east and the west because the bright light and loud noise inspired an instinctual fear in people?

There was no use in trying to reason your way out of it, so you might as well give up.

You could avoid any harmful misunderstandings if you just didn’t think about it in the first place.

The accuracy of their killing was designed to eliminate the possibility of an insurrection before it even began, creating a dull and mentally dead world where everyone was at peace and no one physically died.

That was the Faith Organization's home country.

That was the true face of one of the world powers. The days were calm and peaceful, but that was all their leaders gave them. It was an empty quiet where the people forgot how to create anything inside themselves.

No.

The people at the top may have been of secondary importance. In their efforts to provide peace of mind, they had gradually stripped away all else until they stumbled upon a new experience that, unfortunately, made the people feel like their prayers really had reached their god.

There were ideologies that had people approach an empty mind through harsh training, but this was fundamentally different.

This was a dead spring that had gone dry and produced nothing. No moisture would ever form in this dried nothing. And if nothing was done about it, the empty dryness would only spread from there. The people exhausted by their physical bonds, who ended up wandering the world in search of an unseen god and arrived at the Faith Organization, would have their hearts remade into a buried spring that would never produce a single drop of water.

Because they did not understand it themselves, they did not hesitate to trample the things others held dear.

They were like a tin robot wearing a suit of flesh that's heart had rusted away until it forgot the simple fact that its own actions might bring others pain.

"No..."

Putana Highball trembled in Quenser's arms.

But her reaction was not from fear. She was radiating anger from her entire body as she glared back at those seven demons designed for nothing other than killing internal and external threats.

"Did you think I would just accept this horrific truth? You don't get to make a mockery of all those people who only want to pray to their different gods, purify their souls, and use their heartfelt beliefs to live good and righteous lives!"

Unsurprisingly, the seven Septimontium Objects did not respond.

They may not have understood why she was criticizing them or where her anger even came from. If so, Quenser almost felt bad for them. And he was a realist who only ever pursued whatever best

advanced his own interests.

And because they didn't even have enough freedom to feel doubt, they didn't hesitate.

The seven detached reactors - in other words, the seven lightweight Objects - all moved at once.

Out of the corner of his eye, Quenser glimpsed Millia Newburg slipping down a side road while their attention was on him and Putana. That was definitely the right move.

"Putana!!" he shouted while nearly shoving Putana into a narrow alley and falling in after her.

"Teacher, don't interfere!!"

"Cool your anger, Putana. Once you're calm, tell me where exactly my gaze is directed while you lie on the ground next to me. Hint: it has to do with your naughty miniskirt."

"~ ~ ~!? You pervert!!!!!"

She used one hand to hide the answer to his question and the other to slap him.

He was glad this anger had overwritten her previous anger, taking her off that suicidal path.

They could not forget that their objective was not to defeat Septimontium. It was to protect Rome - although their definition of "protect" was depressingly different from that of the Objects who were willing to crush their own people underfoot. Rome would be submerged in a sea of magma if Bad Garage was not stopped before they could detonate their reactor underground.

As awful as this home country was, the people who lived there had done nothing wrong.

These may have been the world's smallest Objects, but they were still 10m spheres.

"Heh heh. Saving a cute girl, getting an eyeful, and even receiving a slap as a reward? Have I died and gone to heaven? I bet I'd get something unbelievable if I ate a fortune cookie right now."

"Why did I take more damage from that slap than you? Stop being such a creep!"

They heard a loud crash near the entrance to the alley. One of the Septimontium Objects was trying to approach, but it couldn't fit in a space that would be a challenge for a pizza delivery scooter. And the thing wasn't equipped with any projectile weapons. It could gather a blinding light between its electrodes, but that energy couldn't be launched.

However...

“We can’t relax quite yet. If that’s electricity, there are any number of ways to get it to us. We’re dead the instant it finds some water or iron powder to spread around. So face the facts, Putana! We can’t lose those monsters on foot, so we need a car or a motorcycle to-”

Quenser’s thoughts were cut off by a whooshing sound.

It was the tail.

No, they had to still be safe. The spherical body did have a tail-like part on the back, but it was only two or three times the body’s diameter. When swinging it around to attack to the front, its own body got in the way. Just like a scorpion’s stinger or a carnivorous dinosaur’s tail, it was only useful at close range, so it couldn’t reach them back in this alley like an anteater’s tongue.

They were safe.

Perfectly safe.

...So why had his fear frozen the passage of time?

“Teacher, get down!!”

Putana Highball’s shout saved him. He finally realized what was really happening. While the spherical body struggled at the alley entrance, the tail had whipped around and thrown a vending machine it had snatched off the street. The tail had wrapped around the machine like a chameleon’s tongue.

The improvised projectile weighed easily more than 300kg. If Quenser hadn’t immediately kissed the filthy ground, everything above his hips might have been torn away, leaving just his lower body still standing.

After the heavy metal device passed by overhead, Putana quickly got back up, grabbed Quenser’s arm, and pulled him to his feet. They supported each other as they made their way to another exit from the alley.

They heard something passing by overhead while the sun was briefly blotted out.

The Septimontiums were leaping between building rooftops.

“There are seven of them, so we’re completely surrounded. The one at the obvious exit is like the

hound that guides the animal in front of the hunter's rifle. It's a combo play."

"I get that, but I can sense their 'eyes' on us. That means I know when they are about to attack. This way, teacher."

When they arrived at another exit, Putana cautiously observed things outside and then swung her leg up high. Her kick caught a passing motorcyclist on the head and she stole his motorcycle.

"Um, Putana! That's a civilian!"

"Are you just ignoring the scrapes at the base of his thumb, his distinctive muscle balance and tan lines, and the marine tattoo on his arm? He belongs to a Capitalist Corporations PMC! Now hurry!!"

With the signs that obvious, it didn't sound like the man was undercover. Was he just a soldier here to see the carnival while on leave? That still made him a Capitalist Corporations soldier, though.

Putana hopped onto the seat and Quenser climbed on behind her. It took less than thirty seconds to steal the motorcycle and start driving. Still, that was a critical delay. Something blotted out the sun overhead again.

Septimontium had arrived. Worse, three of the 10m spheres leaped down from an abbey roof. Their six insect legs almost looked like a complex alien maw that wouldn't close properly.

"Ahh!!"

"Let's get out of here."

Putana pretended to be driving straight while actually sending the motorcycle through a rapid 180-degree turn and giving them a flying start in the opposite direction. The airborne predators had made their leap based on their prey's expected future position, so they fell for the feint and struck at an empty portion of road. If Putana had thoughtlessly taken the direct path away, they would have been crushed to death one second later.

Quenser buried his face in the brown girl's nape while melting like cheese. It looked ridiculous, but he was holding on for dear life.

"Ooh, you're nice and warm. Soft too. And you smell nice."

"Teacher, I get you're so terrified you might wet yourself, but please do not use me to distract yourself. My patience has its limits."

“I want to eat this ponytail. Woof, woof.”

“I will throw you off the bike, you know?”

Putana sighed in exasperation and took a sharp turn at an intersection.

Quenser tightened his grip around her hips just a bit.

“Damn, I wonder what happened to Millia,” he said.

“Don’t worry. She’s an expert at hiding in the crowd, so I’m sure she escaped. If we searched for her with Septimontium after us, we might actually put her in greater danger. We need to leave her be and draw these things away from her.”

Yes, the threat wasn’t over yet.

If those were Objects, they could handle high-speed battles fought at 600km/h. The motorcycle was far better than being on foot, but it wasn’t enough. It would be harder for those Objects to reach their top speed in this complex urban battlefield than out in an open desert or field, but a commercial motorcycle still couldn’t lose them. If those two wanted to win the battle of speed, they would need a drag racer installed with a rocket engine.

Quenser looked back with his hands tight around Putana’s hips and then he screamed.

“Here they come! Oh, god!! They’re here, here, here!!”

“Teacher, details would be nice.”

They heard what sounded like a thick sheet of metal being torn apart. These things did not use wheels or an air cushion. They only used those insect legs, which were equipped with some kind of spring. They would make short hops to zigzag back and forth in pursuit of the fleeing motorcycle.

“We’re going right, teacher. Lean that way,” said Putana before leaning her body to tilt the motorcycle.

That let a leaping Septimontium fly by overhead while their sharp right turn slid them below a hurdle-like barrier and they drove across a railway crossing that was sounding its alarm.

The Septimontiums didn’t care.

They kicked off the wall of a nearby church or hopped across the roof of a mobile home next to the

railway crossing to leap over the freight train and continue their pursuit of the motorcycle.

They even used their tails to throw each other onto tall rooftops. The tails were not just balancing weights or made to look threatening. They could grab things, support the rest of the Object, and otherwise behave like a hand.

But the brown girl at the motorcycle's handlebars was focused on something else.

"They can jump on rooftops and walls and that mobile home wasn't crushed."

"P-Putana?"

"They must not be very heavy. That means their armor is thin. Teacher, do you have any bombs? These Objects lack the usual nuke resistance. Ordinary weapons can defeat them."

"How dumb are you!? Those are active Object reactors!! There's plasma of up to 100 million degrees Celsius trapped inside there with magnetism. Blow up even one of those in this populated city and millions will die! We need a better plan!!"

"Argh, curse those things. You could say these Objects use the city to their advantage, couldn't you? What a pain."

They heard a grinding sound as something joined them from another street.

Heivia and Myonri were each riding a toy similar to a snowmobile. Except these hadn't been designed for use on the snow.

Quenser's eyes widened.

"What're those!? Some Faith Organization secret weapon!?"

"They're one-person vehicles. Think of them like sporty convertibles. Perfect for Rome's complex layout, right? I see you've hitched a ride on a girl's ass, like usual. You get all the luck!!"

"You won't find a nicer smelling ride anywhere. And did you know a girl's body is smooth no matter where you touch it? I can even feel Putana's pulse when I hold her from behind like this."

"...Teacher, have you ever heard the phrase 'even the Buddha gets mad if you touch his face three times'?"

"I'm not from the Faith Organization, so I can't say I have. Does that mean you're in trouble after

doing it three times, or do you have to go for a fourth time before there are consequences?"

Myonri wanted no part of this conversation, so she did her best to pretend she didn't exist.

It bothered Quenser that Millia Newburg, their de facto leader, wasn't with those two, but all the Septimontiums were after them. He had to trust this was making her safer.

At any rate, their objective was Bad Garage in the subway tunnels.

But the threat presented by Septimontium was very real. Ignore them for even a moment and they were dead.

Quenser pressed his forehead against the top of Putana's head and clenched his teeth.

"We'll have to take a gamble somewhere."

"Teacher?"

"Heivia, Myonri! Keep driving, but get ready to attack. On my mark, target the Septimontiums behind us. You don't have to twist around and aim a gun at them - pulling the pin from a grenade and tossing it behind you is enough to hit them. Get ready!!"

"Wait, are you serious, Quenser?" said Heivia.

"Quenser, are you planning to blow up those reactors in the city!?" said Myonri.

"This isn't about the reactors! And use smoke grenades!!"

Just as they took a sharp turn, Heivia and Myonri both dropped a metal can to the pavement. Colored smoke rapidly spread out behind them.

This was in the middle of a curve and the Septimontiums used thin legs to hop around instead of using continuous tracks or wheels. Needless to say, they had no way of course correcting if they left the ground after misjudging their route.

Flailing their tail around wasn't enough to regain their balance. With nothing to grab onto, they were helpless.

"Eek!!"

Myonri's shoulders shrank down. They heard a deafening crash as one of the Objects failed to make the turn and broke through the wall of a belltower, embedding itself in the building.

"S-something's coming. Ahh!?"

Furious, another Object jumped up to a building rooftop, passed by Quenser's group, and then hopped back down onto the road ahead of them. It was blocking their way ahead while its friends pursued them from behind.

Heivia's chicken spirit kicked in and he started to step on the brake, so Quenser slammed the sole of his boot against the streamlined chassis of his friend's snowmobile-like one-person vehicle.

"Don't chicken out!! Stop and they'll catch up and kill you for sure. Putana, keep us going straight!!"

"You can't be serious..." protested Heivia.

"Oh, and you'll have to figure out how to survive on your own. I don't really have a plan for that part."

"You can't be seriousssssssssssss!!!"

Heivia and Myonri's one-person vehicles parted to the left and right to pass by near the building walls. The Object wasn't sure which one to block on the wide road. Meanwhile, Putana's motorcycle drove straight down the center.

The whip-like tail swept by right next to Quenser's ear.

Putana tilted the motorcycle to skillfully slip between the insect legs like a baseball player sliding into base.

Quenser threw something while passing below the Object.

The clay-like item was a bomb with an electric fuse attached.

After seeing the clay stick, he hit the switch on his radio, detonating it. He was after one of the long, skinny legs, not the reactor. Since those legs were filled with machinery and heavy-duty springs, there couldn't be room left for thick armor.

He didn't even need to look back. One of the legs bent at an unnatural angle, the joint was crushed, and the Septimontium tilted like a table with a broken leg.

Another two Objects tackled the disabled one out of the way and continued pursuit.

There wasn't even time to cheer. Myonri raised her voice nearly to a scream.

"A-aren't those Objects operated by Pilot Elites!? How can they just shove one aside like that!?"

"Knowing the Faith Organization, the spirit of martyrdom is part of their training. Anyway, turn left next, Putana. We can get underground there!! Heivia, Myonri, you two find your own entry routes!!"

Some plywood formed a ramp up to the short curb of a flowerbed. Some local kids may have placed it there for their skateboards, but Putana used it to send the motorcycle into a jump that exceeded anything the vehicle had been designed for.

They cleared a metal fence and landed on the subway track situated a level below the road. Putana shouted back some useful advice during their moment of airtime.

"Teacher, keep your mouth shut and try not to bite your tongue."

"Wahhh, Putana!"

"You don't get to be a spoiled child just because you're scared!!"

After clinging to the girl's hips and sniffing her hair in fear, a sharp impact hit him from below. They had landed on the tracks, but they couldn't afford to slow down. Putana sent the motorcycle full speed into the tunnel entrance.

"I-I can't believe you, teacher! Do you have no shame at all? How can you act so weak and childish around a younger girl!? Really, I just can't believe you!!"

"Huh? Am I imagining it or is your pulse speeding up?"

"Bffff!! You are most definitely imagining it! Wh-why would you ever think otherwise!?"

The underground area had a different aesthetic from the cross-flooded surface. The tunnel had concrete walls and evenly-spaced support pillars, but those pillars had white goddess statues alongside them. They were probably designed after Roman mythology. Some might have even been from an older minor religion that Quenser wasn't even familiar with.

"Welcome to the underground ruins dungeon."

"Ahem. Rome was famous for its public baths, right? Where do we find one of those?"

“Oh? I sense a bath with Putana in my future□”

“Say something that repulsive again and I really will push you off without slowing down, teacher!!”

Then a maintenance door burst open on the wall nearby. Heivia and Myonri’s one-person vehicles emerged after taking a bumpy ride down the stairs.

“Hey, Quenser! Where’re the Septimontiums!? How many are after you!?”

“Odd... None of them are. But the tunnel entrance should have been big enough for them.”

Just then, they heard a warning whistle and a sharp light shined straight out at them.

“Kyah!!”

“Watch out!”

Putana, Heivia, and Myonri all swerved over toward the walls, somehow avoiding the train that caught them by surprise. Even the blast of wind it caused felt like it was going to knock them off balance and make them crash into the wall. And this close, the arms and legs of the goddess statues were frightening indeed.

Then Quenser realized the truth.

“The tunnel itself is big enough, but they can’t avoid the trains.”

“Yeah, those things are 10m spheres, so that’s their width too. They can’t move over to the wall like we can.”

They heard screaming metal behind them.

The Septimontiums were horrific things that used their extraordinary weapons to bind the people’s hearts with fear, but they were still an official Faith Organization fighting force. That meant the government was on their side. They must have put in a call and had the trains stopped.

But this still gave Quenser’s group some time.

They had to use that time to put as much distance between them as possible.

“Heivia, let’s focus back on our original job here. Bad Garage is trying to detonate a reactor deep

underground to trigger an artificial earthquake so they can plunge Rome into a sea of lava. They need to reach a depth of at least 60m for that, so what parts of these subway tunnels meet that condition?"

"Just one. But if the Septimontiums aren't watching right now, we can lose them. These tunnels are spread out like an ant colony down here. The odds are slim they'll find us if they have to search this labyrinth without any clues."

That was good news.

Luring the Septimontiums toward Bad Garage to let the Objects do the job for them was always an option, but there were too many uncertainties to risk it. They couldn't have the dumb defense unit blowing up the reactor along with Bad Garage, triggering the artificial earthquake themselves. And if the bottom-level terrorists did somehow manage to defeat a Septimontium or two, that would only give them more reactors to detonate. Those Objects had thrown out their nuke resistance, which was supposed to be their biggest selling point, to cram themselves into these narrow tunnels, so who could say what would happen now.

The baggage boy seated on the back of the motorcycle continued talking like he was actually important.

"Then let's start on our real job and treat those terrorists to a pummeling. We owe Bad Garage for what they did to us at the start of this whole mess, so let's go repay them with interest."

Part 11

They needed to reach a depth of at least 60m.

Heivia guided them through subway tunnels decorated with the ruins of a religion predating the cross. They stopped their motorcycle and snowmobile-like one-person vehicles a short distance away from their destination. They of course kept them near the wall so they wouldn't be in the way if the trains started back up.

"Th-this place feels different from before. These goddess statues aren't Roman mythology, are they?"

"These are from before Greek mythology was mixed in. We might be seeing older ruins the deeper we go."

Myonri and Putana held an intellectual conversation, but the two sweaty idiots didn't have rich enough minds to observe the ruins and ponder ancient religions.

They were focused on the more immediate problem.

“How did Bad Garage get the reactor down this far? Their truck couldn’t have been small.”

“They probably held a lighter to the ceiling to activate the fire alarm. The tunnels down here are like an ant colony, remember? So there are plenty of ways to keep the trains from passing through a specific section. The trains get stopped all the time, so no one will even question trouble that causes a 5 or 10 minute delay.”

Quenser pulled some Hand Axe from his backpack and molded a ball a little larger than a chicken egg. The Faith Organization had been pursuing them before, but they had no data on what kind of weaponry Bad Garage used. And based on Bad Garage’s actions, it was unlikely they were going to like the answer.

“This is an enclosed tunnel, so I so hope it isn’t gas or a bioweapon.”

“Teacher, couldn’t they have sowed chaos through Rome much more easily if they had toys like that? They need to use an Object component to bring down the home country, but they could have still made things easier for themselves before reaching that point.”

“Good point.”

Quenser recalled how Bad Garage had in fact used cruise missiles and FAE bombs. He doubted they would have kept anything in reserve at that point.

“What’s your guess, Putana?”

“In an enclosed tunnel? A flamethrower scares me the most.”

“Dammit, can’t I at least get a painless death!?”

Quenser and Putana continued their conversation while Heivia and Myonri opened up black plastic items resembling bento boxes. No, after spinning them around like butterfly knives, they transformed into T-shaped submachineguns. Hiding guns below casual clothing wasn’t easy.

Meanwhile, Putana’s weapon of choice was a combat knife with a blade length of more than 40cm. Just as Quenser wondered if she was a close-quarters combat specialist, he noticed two small holes in the grip. It included a gimmick that fired a bullet in the direction the blade was pointing.

After walking a bit further down the underground tunnel full of ancient goddess statues, the brown girl came to a stop.

“I sense some eyes.”

“Kh.”

“But not human ones. They might have mechanical sensors set up.”

This didn't appear to be a standard security camera. It stood on a tripod near the wall to avoid being hit by a train. It was probably a Bad Garage toy. Putana led them along the opposite wall so they could get past without entering its “field of view” and then they circled behind the tripod and yanked out the cable to silence the sensor so they didn't have to worry about it if they needed to make a quick getaway. All the goddess statues provided plenty of hiding spots as they advanced.

They were entering Bad Garage territory now.

The tension grew while Heivia and Myonri moved out ahead with their full-auto guns at the ready.

Quenser looked back at the sensor he had disabled himself.

“They must not have all that many people. Sadly, a living guard is a lot cheaper than a high-quality sensor. They're using money to replace old-fashioned manpower.”

“Convenient fantasies can grow without you realizing it. And then they cloud your vision. ‘Probably’ is fine, but avoid assuming something ‘must be true’. Your own delusion could get you killed.”

They took out a few more sensors on tripods or duct taped to the ceiling as they continued down the dimly-lit tunnel. Without advice from Putana based on her scopophobia, they would have been caught at some point.

And...

“There they are,” said Heivia, coming to a stop and hiding behind a goddess statue by the wall.

About 50m ahead, they could see something else moving across the tunnel: human silhouettes. They doubted this was just some tourists who had gotten lost down here. These silhouettes moved in groups of two, wore night-vision goggles over their eyes, and held weapons equipped with suppressors larger than a 2-liter drink bottle. Their PDWs were more compact than an A4 sheet of paper and they had forcibly attached suppressors larger than the weapons themselves. The PDWs were highly functional and looked somehow futuristic, but at that small size, a large man had to hunch his back when holding it against his shoulder. You couldn't actually hold one of those in each hand and fire them with arms extended like the star of an action movie.

“(Their ‘eyes’ are missing us. They're passing right over us.)”

But that didn't mean they could raise a war cry and charge in guns blazing. They didn't know how

many of them there were, how far along they were on prepping the reactor for detonation, or anything for that matter. Did Bad Garage even value their own lives? In the worst case, they could trigger the explosion as soon as they spotted intruders.

After following Putana's instructions and waiting for the group of two to leave, Quenser's group approached a maintenance door on the wall. The subway tunnels were spread out like an ant colony, but there were also connecting corridors and small rooms for workers not found on the subway maps. Finding another way around was easy.

After circling around in a large fan shape, they spotted a few more guards. By observing the distribution of guards, they could find the central point Bad Garage hoped to hide.

The reactor would be there.

"(Based on the distribution we've seen, there are probably 20 or 30 of them. And no periodic radio-ins. Those tripods had communication cables laid out on the ground, right? Their radios can't reach in these thick tunnels.)"

"Meaning?"

"We can kill them and the rest won't notice. Now's our chance."

It was time for a war of courage and kindness.

Heivia and Myonri aimed their T-shaped submachineguns from a distance, but they were only there for support if things went wrong. They weren't equipped with suppressors like Bad Garage was, so a single shot would be loud enough to raise the alarm. Instead, Putana made sure there were no eyes on her, snuck up behind the pair of guards, and used her knife to stab them in the back and slit their throat in the blink of an eye.

That Elite fought in a different way from the Princess and Oh Ho Ho.

"All done, teacher."

"I'll help."

They wrapped the bodies up in a blue tarp found nearby and dragged them over into a transformer work room. They couldn't fully get the pool of blood off the floor, so they instead covered it up with a new construction tarp. Heivia and Myonri removed the thick suppressors from the enemy weapons and used duct tape to affix them to their own weapons.

"Those aren't the right size connector. Are you sure that will work?"

“It’s better than nothing. This should help more than holding a pillow over the muzzle.”

They had a lot more options with the guns available to them

This was the enemy’s territory, so the enemy would have the advantage in a direct firefight. But if they used Putana’s ability to sense people’s gazes and only made surprise attacks from the enemy’s blind spots, they could take out Bad Garage before the enemy could even counterattack. Putana’s ability to sense gazes was extremely valuable since it gave a surprise attack a nearly 100% success rate.

“Nope, doesn’t work.”

Quenser had bent over and checked through the corpses’ equipment. The enemy did have radios on them, but as Heivia had predicted, they only produced static. The enemy’s inability to communicate in these deep tunnels was a good thing, but that also made it harder to get a read on Bad Garage’s overall movements.

How close were they to detonating the reactor? How did they intend to detonate it without functioning radios?

“U-um, there’s something...up ahead.”

Jack-of-all-trades Myonri had pulled the short straw yet again.

More than 30m ahead was a junction where several tunnels intersected. This was the only place this deep, so did the tracks converge in a bowl shape? The space was a lot wider open than one would expect for that. It wasn’t a bad spot to leave a 10m ball. None of the trains would hit it while it was there.

The goddess statues and decorative marble columns may have been moved to clear out that wide a space.

Putana pushed her binoculars into Quenser’s hands.

“Teacher.”

“Looks like there’s a digital timer on it. so is it timed? But that might not be the only trigger. They might be able to flip a switch to detonate it right away in an emergency. Either way, the countdown has already begun. That means it’s ready to detonate at any time.”

However.

That was not what Myonri had been talking about.

An oblong piece of metal had come to an emergency stop in that wide-open space. It was a train. It must have been stopped to allow the Septimontiums into the tunnel, but this was not a cargo train. It was an ordinary subway train. That meant it had lots of windows along the side, revealing an array of worried faces.

A quick estimate suggested 100 to 200 passengers.

Armed men slowly circled that large cage full of hostages.

From this side, they could see five teams of two. They could get more accurate if they had Putana check the number of eyes, but there were probably more than just those ten. Myonri tearfully looked down at her submachinegun. That was too many to take out with just two submachineguns. And if a single one of them escaped, they could start slaughtering the hostages or just detonate the reactor.

Quenser found it curious that the guards were only around the train and none were inside the train itself. Was there some reason they didn't want to be in there? Had they maybe installed bombs on each car's ceiling to prevent a revolt?

Whatever the case, Heivia summed up the situation nicely.

"Well, this sucks."

Just then, Quenser grimaced. Then he took a closer look through the binoculars.

"Teacher?"

Putana was unique even among Elites for her ability to sense the number and direction of people's gazes. That sense was limited to any eyes on her, but she may have been able to tell Quenser wasn't observing the reactor or the guards.

He was observing the train. There was a small boy among all the hostages looking worriedly out the window. His artificial vision analyzed the lip movements and displayed the words as text.

"They do exist."

The boy was clutching something tight.

Had he bought it at a festival stall, or was it part of a costume? Regardless, it was a cheap hero mask. He would be here for the carnival, after all. The child clutched it tight and stared out the

window.

The binoculars converted his lips movements into words.

Those words were displayed at the bottom of Quenser's vision like a movie's subtitles.

The train had come to a sudden stop. Their lives were at the mercy of an armed group. The Faith Organization military and police showed no sign of coming to rescue them. Work was underway to detonate a bomb large enough to submerge Rome in a sea of lava. No one could have blamed the boy for losing all faith in the world.

Quenser's group was only here to stop the destruction of Rome.

If they were forced to choose between the reactor and the train, they would have to choose the reactor. That might seem sensible, but this was not their city and they were still the kind of bastards who deserved to be spat on.

And yet.

Even so.

"Heroes do exist."

Quenser Barbotage sighed and lowered the binoculars.

He stared straight ahead and spoke to the others.

"You heard the boy. Raise your hand if you wanna be a hero."

"Of course we're all going, dammit."

Part 12

The situation was as follows:

First, the JLevelMHD reactor was extremely delicate when not contained in an Object. A careless firefight or explosion could trigger it, covering Rome in a sea of lava.

Second, between 100 and 200 passengers and crew had been taken hostage inside the stopped train. At least 5 pairs of guards surrounded the train and there were likely more. If even one of those was missed, they would almost certainly start firing in through the train's windows. And the lack of

guards inside the train suggested there might be a booby trap inside.

So Quenser's group needed a plan.

The needed to come up with a way to take out the entire Bad Garage unit without giving them a chance to counterattack.

Maybe they felt out of place and maybe this didn't feel like their job, but it was time to play the hero, at least for now.

"Will this really work?" asked Heivia.

"They're all pointed in the same direction, but this is still an enclosed tunnel," explained Quenser. "It will affect us to an extent, so find us somewhere to hide."

The student unreeled a long cable. With their radios not working, they needed a wired detonation method.

Yes, detonation.

But they weren't approaching the enemy, setting up bombs, and then slaughtering the Bad Garage bad guys with explosive flames and sharp shrapnel. That could easily detonate the reactor and any guards on the other side of the train could survive.

Quenser himself had hinted at what they were really doing.

They were inside an enclosed tunnel.

"Teacher."

"The pressure calculations check out, so we're all ready. What, our shelter is a supply closet?"

It was a storeroom about half the size of a school classroom.

Quenser finished laying out the long cable and stepped through the metal door's threshold to approach Putana. He had to close the door on the cable, but that was fine as long as it could still carry a current. He closed the door gently to make sure he didn't break the actual wire inside the thick cable. Fortunately, this wasn't a macaroni-like fiber optic cable.

They couldn't see anything now.

But the enemy's location was irrelevant. If their attack covered the entire space, Bad Garage had no way to escape.

Their plan was to use a long-distance detonation.

They sent a shockwave down the enclosed tunnel like cleaning a bath pipe.

They heard a loud boom and the closed metal door bent inwards. The world seemed to shake around Quenser. The shockwave would always travel down the path of least resistance, but it still affected them somewhat.

Quenser couldn't support his own weight and leaned against the wall while shaking his head to try and stop the ringing in his ears.

"Go, Heivia, Myonri!! The stun effect of the shockwave rattling their inner ear won't last long. You have less than 30 seconds, so shoot them all now!!"

They had trouble getting the bent door open, but the pair armed with submachineguns still charged out into the tunnel. Quenser followed after them with Putana lending him her shoulder.

Whichever side of the train the guards were on, the shockwave and rapid pressure change would have stunned them. When an extreme pressure change filled an entire space, you couldn't escape just by hiding behind an obstacle. And none of the Bad Garage unit had been inside the train. The hostages wouldn't be affected since they were safely enclosed in that sealed space and a simple pressure change wouldn't cause the reactor to explode.

The dull sounds of suppressed gunfire signaled the beginning of the slaughter. Heivia and Myonri unilaterally fired into the heads and chests of the soldiers lying unmoving on the ground, so the civilians on the train might have viewed them as the villains here. But it was game over if even one of those terrorists got up like a not-quite-dead worm. So many lives would be lost if they started firing on either the train full of hostages or the reactor.

Quenser chose to accept the people's screams and disgust.

Putana continued to lend him her shoulder while raising her combat knife and firing one of the bullets hidden in its grip into the head of a soldier the other two had missed.

"Someone is pretending to be dead. I still sense someone's living eyes on me!!"

The student's inner ear had finally recovered.

He could walk without Putana's support now, but the same applied to Bad Garage. If he could walk,

they would have recovered as well.

A soldier tried to press some kind of switch with trembling fingers.

(They aren't trying to show off their technological prowess to the military or the police and they weren't trying to drive terror into the people by making something that can't be disarmed. This shouldn't be a complex puzzle of a bomb!!)

Quenser tore the digital timer from the round reactor. He threw it away just as Heivia's submachinegun shot through the last remaining survivor's head.

Blinding white sparks scattered across the floor. The thick metal rail had been melted by a great heat. A moment later and the reactor's exterior would have been melted through and the plasma within would have burst out.

"Are we clear now!?"

"I think so. But the hostages are still trapped! The guards were staying off the train for some reason and we haven't checked it for booby traps yet. It might blow up the instant we manually open the door!!"

Quenser cautiously checked through the window and then climbed below the train. There it was. Some colorful cords were tangled around the metal tank for the air compressor used to open and close the automatic door. It would indeed blow up the instant the door opened.

(Bad Garage wouldn't have expected these hostages. The one on the reactor was simple, so they wouldn't have had a bomb covered in a mess of cords like you see in the movies.)

He gulped and got to work. Bad Garage must have only cared that the hostages inside the train couldn't deactivate it. He used a tester to check the current in the cords and then removed a clothespin-like clip to release the dangerous cord.

And he didn't need to open all of the train's doors. As long as one of them was safe, all the hostages could move between cars and escape from here.

Quenser operated the emergency release lever to force the door open from outside, gestured, and spoke in the Legitimacy Kingdom language.

"Take it slow and one at a time!! There's a drop to the ground, so watch your step!!"

The people inside seemed nervous. They were afraid to approach the door, but they had no reason to stay inside now that it was open. They all hesitated while the small boy nearest the door nervously

approached Quenser.

Quenser smiled and tried to be reassuring.

“Let’s get you all back home. So did we pull off the hero thing here?”

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Putana wrinkle her brow in doubt.

The square panel of a maintenance hatch rose up on the train’s floor near the boy.

“Teacher!! There’s more of them!!”

Something was thrown out of the open door.

The metal can was a stun grenade with the pin removed.

Any Bad Garage survivors would try to detonate the reactor.

They hadn’t seen any guards entering or leaving the train and they had found bombs on the doors, so they had assumed no one from Bad Garage was on the train.

Hadn’t Heivia said “probably” is fine, but avoid assuming something “must be true”?

“Oh, shi-”

If only they hadn’t all been focused on the one open door. A magnesium flash filled the tunnel and the entire Legitimacy Kingdom’s group had their vision and hearing knocked out.

Part 13

How much time was actually taken from him?

30 seconds? More than a minute? Quenser’s senses were blown away and his panicked mind lost track of time. In an ordinary life back in a safe country, that might have been an insignificant amount of time, but it was a very long time indeed during a battle with guns aimed at each other. That kind of time was enough to turn things around when outnumbered. The last remaining member of Bad Garage would be able to shoot each member of Quenser’s group one at a time.

Quenser focused on his backpack while trying to grab the boy and turn around to protect the boy with his back, but he wasn’t even sure of that. His eyes and ears weren’t working and his mind was so confused he couldn’t even feel the boy he knew had to be in his arms.

A flat white afterimage sat before his eyes for quite a while.

And eventually...

“Gh...”

He heard a muffled bloody groan.

But it didn't come from his own mouth.

At close range - truly less than a meter - the man who had thrown the stun grenade from the maintenance hatch was doubled over and unmoving.

Quenser had never seen the young man before.

Putana had immediately readied her combat knife at her hip and then stabbed him in the side.

That special Elite could sense people's gazes, so had she approached the source of that young man's gaze even with her traditional senses knocked out?

He could have aimed directly at Quenser, but he must have also glanced over at the others, including Putana.

At first, he stared down at his own wound in disbelief.

Then he silently looked up and smiled at Quenser directly in front of him. He held a switch in his hand. Radios generally didn't work in the tunnel, but they worked just fine when only a few meters away from the target.

“Happy...new world,” said the smiling young man.

Quenser used a hand to cover the eyes of the boy in his arms.

A dry gunshot rang out.

With the blade still stabbed deep in his side, Putana had pulled the small clasp-like trigger on the knife's grip to fire a bullet directly into him. The impact knocked him away, forcibly pulling the knife from him. Its serrated back widened the wound further.

The young man collapsed on his side and Quenser kicked some kind of switch away from him.

He did not get back up.

But he did speak through a bloody smile.

“If you...pursued us this far...you must understand this world is built on lies.”

“Who are you?”

“Just a nobody from Deyeria Village. A village destroyed by the earthquake and lava of an Object disaster.”

Quenser had never heard of that.

It had never been mentioned before.

Not the disaster and not the village.

The young man had smiled thinly. Maybe this was why. He had already lost everything he had hoped to protect, so he had nothing left to lose. So he had hoped to cause a disaster in a home country to force everyone to look at the thing they were all trying so hard to ignore.

“It’s your turn to suffer now.”

“This is already over. This wasn’t even a war. The higher ups are starting to realize what the Objects are doing to our planet, so sooner or later they will start to work to prevent it. This won’t turn into a global disaster like you think it will.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. An Object disaster is coming to Rome.”

Quenser glanced over at the reactor. He had removed the detonator, but he was not a bomb squad expert. There was always a chance there was a second or third detonator.

But the young man rejected that idea.

“That was just insurance. Detonating that was our Plan B if things didn’t go as planned. We’d have a hard time claiming one of those 200 thousand ton behemoths did it if we just detonated a reactor, right? So that wasn’t Plan A.”

“What? You’ve still got something else up your sleeve!?”

“Wait, Heivia. He’s already dying. You can’t treat him too roughly.”

Myonri quickly stopped the pissed noble. But she wasn’t particularly worried about this villain’s rights – she just didn’t want him to die before they got more information out of him.

“You can find plenty of mineral springs around Rome. That means there’s a lot of magma spread out across a wide area underground. Rome is an unstable area since it shares the same magma reservoir as Mount Vesuvius.”

But the young man made no attempt to hide it.

Did that mean it was too late to stop it?

“We only needed to gather enough Objects here. Septimontium wasn’t enough since they only follow their rails or separate their reactor for greater mobility. So we needed to create a reason for the other world powers to send in their own Objects.”

“You don’t mean...” Quenser understood now. “The Princess and Oh Ho Ho were the real trigger!?”

Once they arrived on land, the water filling the cup to the brim would overflow. A single extra drop would exceed the surface tension’s limits and ruin everything.

Quenser grabbed his radio and shouted into it.

“This is Quenser! Princess, can you hear me!? Princess, Baby Magnum!! Dammit!?”

The young man smiled thinly from the ground.

He knew radio signals were useless in these thick tunnels. Especially if you hoped to contact the surface.

“Checkmate.”

Something shook. The ground disconcertingly pushed up below their feet.

“Happy...new world. Now we’ve rid the world of its lies. Welcome to a new, more transparent world. No one will ever believe the great scam of the clean wars again.”

“...”

“Drown in the true face of war - an endless world war.”

Part 14

“?”

The Baby Magnum’s naval floats had been removed, so it began traveling inland from the mouth of the Tiber. The Rush didn’t need to swap out floats since it used an air cushion, so it had started toward Rome earlier.

(She went on ahead, so I hope she at least took out one enemy Object for me. No, better not get my hopes up. Counting on her shoddy skills is just asking for disappointment.)

“Oh ho ho. You weren’t thinking something rude just now, were you?”

“Why do you keep talking to me? Are you lonely?”

The Princess and Oh Ho Ho were not alone. They could also see a few Capitalist Corporations Second Generations like the Under Gate and the Bullet Lens. The Faith Organization had also sent in the Zombie Powder and the Blast Samurai as ace Objects meant to defend against “unauthorized peace-keeping activities”. ...Although calling in such impressive reinforcements showed just how little the Faith Organization actually trusted Septimontium.

At any rate, all four world powers had gathered here.

Rome had become as much of a tinderbox as that Oceanian military nation. Altogether, there had to be more than 20 Objects present.

Just then, the Princess noted a few small oddities.

She initially thought her sensors were acting up. Her static electricity propulsion device moved her 200 thousand ton Object by having it float. She assumed the maintenance soldiers had been in such a rush to remove the naval float that they had bumped some of the laser sensors that measured the contours of the terrain.

But she was wrong.

The distortion was growing. It was no longer just an “oddity”. The ground was shaking. And not just below the Baby Magnum. It was shaking as far as the eye could see.

“Oh ho ho. Wh-wh-wh-what is happening here!?”

“Is it shaking there too?”

It reached what she assumed had to be the peak and then continued to grow. She felt instinctual fear clutching her heart even as she sat in the cockpit of a nuke-resistant Object. She pictured this as a fatal blow. It was a lot like the unimaginable pain that kept growing when you were stabbed with a knife or shot with a gun.

“Is this the Objects’ great weight causing a-”

“Stop, you stupid Information Alliance commander! Letting them know about that won’t improve their situation!!”

Frolaytia’s panicked response was all the confirmation the Princess needed.

She hadn’t been wrong at all.

This was a fatal blow to the planet itself.

The limit had finally been reached. The planet’s thick crust couldn’t bear the shaking and shattered.

In other words, the ground itself split open and orange lava spewed from the depths.

On that day, the Faith Organization’s home country was wiped from the world map.

<http://tl.rulate.ru/book/5253/1909689>