

Chapter 1: Bloody Pool >> Atlantic Artificial Island Proxy War

Part 1

Intense light, noise, and shockwaves.

In that moment, Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage could not tell up from down, could not hold his memories together in a coherent fashion, and felt all his other senses melt together.

His vision blurred and he had trouble breathing like he had a thick translucent sheet over his face. He felt a scorching heat, but he could not get his thoughts working to the point of coming up with a course of action to eliminate the unpleasant sensation. Only the pounding of his heart sounded unpleasantly raw and real. That should have been the proof that he was alive, but it instead felt as unpleasant as putting back on a shirt after removing it.

Where was he?

What was he doing?

The blond boy focused his mind on remembering those two things. If he let go of that, it was all over. If his mind lost even more focus, he would never recover. He knew that without anyone telling him.

(Oh, right... I remember now.)

As usual, he had been on a shitty job with the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. He had been at New Caribbean Island, a tropical island near Central America where the weather completely ignored the fact that it was October. It had all started when he set out on a philanthropic mission (but really meant to earn a diplomatic card) to rescue a Capitalist Corporations submarine that was stranded at the bottom of the ocean after having engine trouble. On that submarine, they had found an old woman wanting to defect from the Information Alliance. She had claimed to be Katarina Martini, a biochemical engineer.

By taking in the old woman who had led the Information Alliance's crucial genius girl project, they had triggered a serious military clash with the Information Alliance who did not want their technology leaking out. That had begun a fierce battle against the Nitrogen Mirage, a cutting-edge Second Generation that could bend its lasers as it pleased.

(...Kh...)

His mind was all mixed up. He felt a dull headache slowly traveling from right to left in his brain. His stomach roiled disconcertingly, like he had triggered some kind of trauma. This was an important issue. The Nitrogen Mirage was a powerful enemy. But that was not the crux of the problem. The true darkness lurked beyond that.

A blinding light had...

“How long are you going to lie there!? Wake up already!!!!!!”

He heard a sharp shout and felt incredible pressure across his entire face.

It took him a few seconds to realize a bucket of seawater had been dumped on his face while he lay on his back.

“Uhh, what, cough, cough!! Uehh!? Cough!!”

Quenser choked and somehow managed to sit up, but then the toe of a thick military boot mercilessly kicked him in the jaw.

His vision shook and he rolled back onto the hard ground. It felt a lot like hot asphalt that had been sitting in the midsummer sun, but it was not.

“Ughh...ubweh...!?”

(What? Is this...the deck of...an aircraft carrier...?)

“Who gave you permission to speak and move? Have you forgotten that your lives are in our hands?”

He heard a low female voice from overhead.

He could not see her face well with the tropical sun behind her.

He also heard a young man’s voice.

“Captain, he appears to be the last one.”

“Hmph. That seems less than in the report.”

“Perhaps they went down with the Flagship 019 when it lost its balance? We could send divers to the sunken ship if need be.”

“That would be a waste of personnel expenses.”

Quenser tried to roll onto his stomach, but a military boot kicked him and he decided not to move.

He moved only his eyes to observe his surroundings. ...They were there. There were maybe a few dozen soldiers wearing soaking-wet Legitimacy Kingdom uniform identical to his lying on the slanted flight deck. It was reminiscent of the corpses lined up for counting after a plane crash.

He saw dark clouds.

As if to predict Quenser and the others' futures, thick clouds covered the blue sky and had started to blot out the sun. Although those may have been caused by the extra-large attack that had assaulted them.

And once the sun faded, he could see.

The person looking down at him was a tall and beautiful girl of about 18. Her skin was white...but it had a different luster from Quenser and his group's. With that and the long black hair tied back, she was probably of Asian descent. She wore a bluish sailor uniform and a miniskirt. That clued Quenser in to the situation.

The time between the Manhattan's attack and this assault force abducting Quenser's group had been too short.

"...So you're from the Flagship 019...no, from the maintenance fleet. Hah. Were you promoted because your boss Piranirie kicked the bucket?"

The girl's subordinate gave him another kick.

She must not have felt any real hatred toward him. The Asian beauty looked down at him like he was a bug crawling along the roadside.

"We will decide what will be done with all of you. As I said, your lives are in our hands." She then glanced to the side. "But we have a more important issue to take care of. Hello, comrade! Lieutenant Colonel Wraith Martini Vermouthspray!! My fellow Martini!!"

Quenser tensed up at that.

Yes. Wraith's cooperation with the Legitimacy Kingdom had been a personal decision. Since the Martini Series which supported the Capulet AI Network was acting oddly, Wraith's decision may have been correct. But this and that were two very different things.

"Hello, Taratua."

"Hello, Wraith."

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray was a blonde girl of about 12. She wore a formal black hat over her long blonde hair and a pitch black uniform that was poorly suited for the tropical sun.

She had no allies in the Legitimacy Kingdom or the Information Alliance.

A young man of unknown age stood beside her, but that alone was not much to rely on.

The Asian beauty named Taratua may have meant no real harm. The way the corners of her lips curled into a smile looked childish for her age.

Yes. Almost like the look of a child tearing off a captured insect's legs one by one.

"I was placed in the maintenance fleet as Piranirie's spare, but what kind of mission was a fellow Martini given that required working with enemy soldiers? I certainly haven't heard of anything like that, so was it a highly-classified special mission?"

"..."

"Yes. Silence is the best answer here. Even if you try to lie about it and invent some fake mission, you never know when you'll blow it."

Their ranks were captain and lieutenant colonel, but Taratua did not hold back. If it could be proven that Wraith had been colluding with the Legitimacy Kingdom and had arrived here in violation of her actual mission, she would be no more than a traitor or deserter. Then no one could complain if she was shot in the back here and now.

"I'll give you a chance."

Taratua drew an impractically large revolver from her hip. It must have absorbed the dark color of the thick clouds overhead because the polished black weapon looked sinister. Wraith held out a hand to stop the young man who tried to move in front of her.

She winked her right eye and asked a question.

"You want to test my luck? That is impressively unscientific."

"Ha ha! Oh, we're not playing Russian roulette. Ignoring someone's actual actions and only seeing if god loves them is more of a Faith Organization thing. You're almost certainly guilty, but I know just how valuable the contents of your mind are. So, comrade, it isn't your head you'll be blowing away."

Taratua spun the entire revolver around like a cheap pen and then held the grip out toward Wraith.

“The Second Generation Laser Beam 069, Piranirie, the recently sunk Flagship 019...and now an attack from that Manhattan 000. Our maintenance fleet is in tatters and our higher ups have probably been wiped out. We can't let this continue. And if we're going to recover, we need as many soldiers as we can get. And that includes you, my comrade and my fellow Martini.”

And.

She said it as casually as could be.

“Shoot that boy there. I'll judge your true intentions based on that.”

.....
.....

The atmosphere solidified.

Still on his back, Quenser checked on the situation by turning his head so stiffly the joint seemed rusted.

His eyes met Taratua's.

He could not read Wraith's emotions at all.

Before breathing her last, Piranirie Martini Smoky had said there was something breaking and driving the entire Martini Series mad. And it was controlled by someone outside the Information Alliance rather than Katarina, the old woman in charge of the genius girl project.

Was this also a product of that artificial madness?

Or was this normal for the Asian beauty known as Taratua?

“As I said, this isn't Russian roulette, so none of the bullets have been removed.”

He understood.

What would Wraith Martini Vermouthspray do in this situation? Wasn't there anything else she could do? Quenser understood. If she obeyed, one would die. If she did not, they would all die. It was simple arithmetic. Even if the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance had been temporarily working together because their interests aligned, they were still enemies.

There was no reason for her not to do it.

Once you had $1 + 1 = 2$, no amount of searching would turn up another answer.

“We went to an effort to rescue these lives, so we will have these idiots work for us to make up for it. And they will keep working until they wear out and die.”

But.

Could it be...?

“But things are different for this one: Quenser Barbotage. This irregular actor ignores the rules of cost-effectiveness by running around destroying Objects. We will kill him here. It functions as camouflage and gives us a prize for the higher ups.”

“Wait!!”

That was when a soldier lying a short distance away raised his voice and was kicked in the jaw by one of the sailors walking between the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers who were lined up like corpses. A dark red liquid splattered from his split lip, but he kept shouting with the eyes of a chained dog.

“He isn’t a soldier! He’s a battlefield student!! If you know who he is, you must know that. Be careful how you handle him or it’s you who’ll be in trouble later!!”

It was Heivia Winchell.

But it was no use. All he could do was yell from the aircraft carrier deck.

Taratua paid him no heed.

“You are more like disposable parts than prisoners of war. The fact that any of you survived will be erased from any and all reports, so what does it matter how one or two of you is treated now?”

She sounded somewhat exasperated, but there were several endlessly ominous phrases mixed in.

And it was time to decide.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray grabbed the proffered magnum’s grip with a troubled look.

Taratua reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a device much like the collapsible opera glasses sold at concert halls. She casually unfolded it and winked.

“Say cheese. The time it takes to decide, your breathing, your perspiration, your eye movements, the trembling of your fingertips. I’m measuring them all like a true Information Alliance soldier, so don’t do anything suspicious.”

“...”

The Asian beauty gestured with her chin and her subordinate soldiers grabbed Quenser’s arms and lifted him up. They were near the railingless edge of the slanted flight deck, so there was no escape.

A small girl stood directly in front of him.

The unsuitably large handgun’s muzzle was pointed toward the boy’s face.

(...Think.)

Sweat poured from his body.

He even had trouble blinking for the first time in his life.

Death.

True death was approaching.

(What is the Manhattan doing? If Taratua’s group is just the survivors of the maintenance fleet, are they really working as a solid group? Has anything been done to that handgun? What does Wraith think? Is there something I could use as a bomb or another weapon? What’s security like? This flight deck is unstable and tilted. The others are lying on the deck. ...What happened to the Princess’s Baby Magnum? There has to be something! There has to be at least one thing I can use!!!!)

“I’m sorry, Quenser. It looks like you’re still working your mind and foolishly haven’t given up hope.”

A voice seemed to slice right through the boy’s thoughts.

Wraith’s blue eye stared quietly at him through the sight.

“But this time, there really is...nothing.”

The dry gunshot...

...sounded far too light.

Part 2

“The world’s...gest Obje... New Yo...Manhattan...tself was...mation Alliance’s Object!?”

“An offici...statement was...with a video. The Manhat...intends...join this war!!”

“Not good...ood!! Everyone, brace for impact! The enemy...an electromagnetically...ched reactor cannon. It’s a demonic weapon that...the heat usually contai...the reactor which uses lasers...pellet fuel!! Our New Caribb...blown away!?”

“Curse the Marti...ries. How insane...they!?”

It was pandemonium.

The busy silver-haired high-ranking officer named Frolaytia Capistrano’s vision had been entirely flipped upside down and she initially could not remember where she was.

Light flashed before her eyes like she had been slapped the instant she ran across someone. The core of her mind was unsteady and she spent a while in an unthinking daze.

Slowly, like thin ice being melted by a blow dryer, her mind managed to focus on the cruel reality.

“Uh, kh...?”

She first realized she was collapsed face down.

She had been in the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion’s officer’s barracks using her laptop to receive a report from a subordinate in their distant home country. But the scene around her had entirely changed. The ceiling was too low. No, the entire barracks building had been crushed down. The space was too cramped and the other things in the room were so close she could barely see. She did not have time to check on her Island Nation collection. Her military-issued items and personal possessions were scattered around her. Among those, she grabbed a laptop with a broken LCD screen and a keyring of hardware keys. Then she crawled through the cramped space.

Luckily, she was not trapped by an ankle caught in the rubble or anything else like that.

Did she have to crawl a few meters or a few dozen meters? Her sense of time and distance were far too vague as she bit her lip and made her way outside. She could see the outside light ahead of her, but the end never seemed to arrive. She had no guarantee this was the right way to go. The collapsed ceiling approached ever closer overhead the further she crawled, so she might find her hips trapped before she reached the exit.

That self-produced doubt gnawed at her mind as she dug at the ground with neatly clipped and filed nails to slowly but surely make her way forward.

(Finally...)

The light was approaching.

She had somehow managed to escape the pile of rubble under her own power.

(...Finally.)

And as soon as she did, a hellish scene spread out before her eyes.

As a reminder, Frolaytia Capistrano was on New Caribbean Island located in the Atlantic Ocean near Central America. It was a special island made by the lava of an artificial eruption caused by stimulating a submarine volcano with explosives. The island was a collection of small black rocks that looked like crunchy chocolate and it had originally been made as a bluefin tuna breeding base for her brother Bloodrics Capistrano. Frolaytia had stationed her Object maintenance battalion there and had been in the middle of a battle with an Information Alliance maintenance fleet and its Second Generation Object, the Nitrogen Mirage.

Those assumptions had been blown away.

First of all, the color was wrong.

The dark stone ground was glowing like an electrically-heated wire or a reactor. The cooled and solidified lava had been melted anew by an outside heat source. Like two scoops of ice cream dropped on the midsummer asphalt, the melted surface formed orange rivers that flowed toward the sea and then formed rising walls of billowing steam. Thanks to the immense light, heat, and steam, the bright sun overhead appeared to waver and dim. It may have been the same as the lights of a metropolis erasing the stars from the night sky.

“...”

It took Frolaytia a while to accept her situation here.

(This was done by the Manhattan's main cannon. And it fired from a few thousand kilometers away...)

But she had to face reality.

There were around 1000 people in the maintenance battalion and half of them had gone to the front line based on the military operation Frolaytia had planned. So how many of the approximately 500 logistical support and standby personnel remained in this hell containing several orange rivers? That was about two schools' worth of people. She had no idea how many more were lost with each passing second. She did not have time to stop just because she found it hard to accept.

"Report..."

Frolaytia raised her voice so it would not be drowned out by the explosive steam rising from the coast.

"Someone give me a report!! We need to know the scope of the damage, we need a relatively undamaged area we can evacuate to, and we need a set of surviving equipment and facilities! Simply saving the lives in front of you will only waste valuable resources. Then we can't even save the lives you think you've saved. We need to avoid redundancies and carry out a rescue operation with maximum efficiency!!"

There was no response.

Not even the very basics were functioning.

"Hi, Tia-chan..."

"..."

The busty silver-haired commander's shoulders jumped when someone spoke gently from behind her.

She just about let out her face as a family member, but she just barely managed to suppress it before turning around. She greeted the young man as the commander of the maintenance battalion.

It was Bloodrics Capistrano.

He had worn a black tailcoat even on this tropical island, but he had removed that, leaving him with just a white shirt. Had he used the coat to treat a wounded soldier, or had he discarded it before it melted in the heat?

He held a drawn katana in one hand.

There was no scabbard. For some reason, the blade was wet with a red liquid. It was unclear what had happened on the way here, but that was a clear sign of just how chaotic the situation was.

The sweat on his brow may have gotten in his eye or he may have had some other reason, but Bloodrics kept one eye unnaturally shut as he forced a smile on his blatantly exhausted face.

“Shouting won’t do you any good. The previous war is over. This has gone beyond Piranirie Martini Smoky or the Nitrogen Mirage. The conditions have changed.”

“What are you talking about? That isn’t for me to decide! It’s true the damage is severe, but we can’t just quit fighting a war like flipping a switch!! No matter the devastation before our eyes, we can still gather the surviving personnel and equipment for a counterattack. I’ll admit it’s like whipping the dead, but if we give up and stop resisting, everyone under my command will simply sink into the lava!!”

Frolaytia was not illogically relying on pure willpower.

She had more to say.

“Calm down, think, and never give up on being human! Why did the Information Alliance suddenly pull out their greatest secret weapon like this? It was at the center of their home country, so they shouldn’t have had any reason to send it to the front line. I don’t know the details of the issues with the Martini Series who monitor the AI network which may not even have a core, but if they have the full authority of a world power, they had to have had a better way of doing this.”

“...”

“We do not know how far the problems have spread within the Martini Series. If it’s limited to the ones in charge of protecting New York, it makes sense that only the Manhattan was sent out. But this is a fluid situation. If the other Martinis also begin acting oddly, the problems could spread uncontrollably throughout the Information Alliance!”

“Tia-chan, you are overwhelmingly correct here.”

Her brother slowly breathed out.

Bloodrics was supposedly a civilian, but he spoke to his sister like he was calmly explaining something while she threw a tantrum.

“But there is no one to answer your call.”

“!?”

“By a general estimate, 60-70% of those remaining on the island were lost. And losing 30% is normally considered a rout, is it not? You can no longer maintain ordinary military activity here. Tia-

chan, your job here is to remove or destroy all classified information so the Information Alliance cannot steal it. And that includes yourself as the major in command of the entire battalion.”

“ ... ”

“You must not be captured. No matter what. Do you really think the Manhattan is finished with only that one shot? Whether it fires a second and third shot or they send a large landing unit to the devastated remnants of the battalion, you have a single job here, Tia-chan: ...Escape. It does not matter how pathetic or cowardly you feel. Tia-chan, you carry a responsibility here, so you must get yourself away from here. Even if you are the only one that escapes.”

She intellectually understood that.

If she was captured, the enemy could steal the biometric information like her center of gravity or iris scan that allowed access to the military datalink. Or they could get her to talk about future operations no one was supposed to know about or the names of spies who had infiltrated enemy countries. Then the damage would spread beyond just this war. To minimize the losses, she had to make sure it was limited to just this war.

The busty silver-haired commander slowly breathed out.

After throwing the laptop and hardware keys into the lava, she drew her military handgun from its holster.

“...I will withdraw only after saving as many lives as I can. As their commander, I will be rear guard.”

“Tia-chan.”

“Yes, yes!! I know it’s inefficient!!”

Frolaytia shouted back at him and pressed the military handgun’s muzzle against her own temple.

Brother and sister glared at each other and she gathered strength in her brow to keep her face as a girl from coming out.

“But there are still so many allies buried alive in this rubble and lava, unable to even groan! Not to mention the soldiers fighting the Information Alliance at the maintenance fleet out at sea!! They’re out there because I ordered them there! I can’t use insufficient data as an excuse. I can’t abandon them and run away. They would die pointless deaths if I did!!”

“ ... ”

“Destroying all classified information was the bare minimum requirement, wasn’t it? That won’t be a problem. Officers aren’t issued guns to shoot the enemy. It’s to blow their own brains out if need be!!”

Still holding his drawn katana, Bloodrics shook his head with a sorrowful look on his face.

He must have understood his sister’s feelings all too well.

She did not let her status as a noble bind her. When necessary, she had risked her life and used her own strength to protect her soldiers. That was a joyous thing for Bloodrics. If his sister had something she wanted to protect, he wanted to fight alongside her as her brother. He truly did.

Finally, he took a deep breath of resignation.

And the brother spoke to his sister.

“I’m sorry, Tia-chan. But I can’t let you do that.”

Did Frolaytia even know what caused the quiet sound on her head?

“Bh...?”

The pommel of the katana held by the silver-haired young man had dug into the side of her head. Just like knocking someone out with a pistol grip. Before she could even move her finger to pull the trigger, the girl’s eyes grew unfocused and her body went limp.

Before she fully collapsed, Bloodrics wrapped an arm around her waist which, as her brother, he felt was too skinny. If he was not careful, the finger on the trigger could accidentally fire the bullet.

“Striking my own sister... I am truly a disgrace to the concept of chivalry.”

He sounded utterly disgusted, but he was extremely dry when it came to this. Those military reasons meant nothing to him since he was a civilian, albeit a noble one. His first and foremost objective was to protect his precious sister no matter what it took.

On his way here, he had heard many voices begging him to kill them.

Some had had lava dumped on their head and others were caught in the rubble. Bloodrics had turned the tip of his katana on those soldiers who had no hope left.

He would not forget their words of thanks.

How could he ever forget?

“...I’m sick of it all.”

Frolaytia had built up this world of hers bit by bit as she resisted the noble society, so he could not allow her to see it tragically fall apart.

She could resent him if she liked.

She could hate his guts if she had to.

Bloodrics tossed aside his bloodstained katana and placed a finger to his ear. He was about to send out a transmission.

“It’s me.”

As soon as he focused on the small earpiece, the young man took on the face of a noble.

“Yes, I would like an emergency exit. Use that submarine. I would like to pick up as many Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers as possible, but there is no need to force it. We leave in 15 minutes. Give up on any we cannot pick up. Don’t worry. None of you need play the villain’s role. That I will do alone.”

Still supporting his unconscious family member’s weight, Bloodrics looked through the lava’s heat and steam to view the distant horizon.

According to Frolaytia, she had sent some of her soldiers out to sea.

It had been necessary. Even if it had required ignoring her personal feelings.

But if the maintenance battalion withdrew from New Caribbean Island, they would have nowhere to return to. Once isolated out at sea, no one would come to save them no matter how much they screamed.

Bloodrics Capistrano was doing that to them.

He was prepared to dirty his hands with the things that someone had to do.

“...Such a disaster. For us and them.”

Part 3

And no one came.

The Legitimacy Kingdom military was supposedly stationed at New Caribbean Island. The Princess's Baby Magnum was supposedly out in the wide ocean.

And yet.

No one.

"...I'll kill you..."

A voice burning with resentment echoed across the rusty flight deck.

It belonged to Heivia Winchell who could not even shed any tears.

He moved his trembling body as best he could to crawl to the edge of the flight deck, but there was already no sign of his friend's corpse.

Only a strange dark red liquid stained the water's surface as a large shadow slowly swam below.

"Ha ha. Don't do that, Wraith!"

Taratua held her stomach as she laughed.

There were tears in the corners of her eyes.

"You can feed his corpse to the sharks if you like. Peh heh heh. But we'll never hear the end of it if you feed them the metals and plastics along with it. Ah hah hah hah!!!"

With that, something really did snap inside Heivia's mind. He crossed a line.

"I'll kill you!! I'll murder you!! I don't care anymore if you're insane or broken or whatever the hell. I'll turn every last one of you to mincemeat in a hail of bullets!!!!!"

In the end, where was that threat directed?

No one knows.

Part 4

“Attention, 101st Zombie Platoon!!”

They were out in the open.

There were not even any chairs or tables.

Heivia and the other defeated survivors of the Legitimacy Kingdom were gathered on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier which was tilted too far to be of any use. Rain was pouring down from the thick storm clouds, but there was no roof or anything else to protect them. There were not even any railings, so if they got careless and slipped on the wet flight deck, they could roll right off into the ocean where the hungry sharks waited.

The only person with a smile on her face was Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks, but she stood below a large umbrella held by a male subordinate.

“That impressive attack from my piece of shit comrade on the Manhattan 000 has whipped up quite the storm. That gives us an opportunity for the dead to do some work.”

“...Are you unfamiliar with the concept of war treaties? This is no way to treat POWs.”

“What, do you want to be thrown inside a zoo cage like the amusing animal you are?”

She was blunt.

Whether it had been injected from an external source like with Piranirie or if she had always been like that, the thoroughly-broken Asian beauty did not bat an eye.

“You cowards boarded our maintenance fleet’s flagship and then shared the fate of the Flagship 019 after a variety of attacks finally sunk it. Thus, there were zero survivors. Your survival has been scrubbed from any and all records, so worry not and go have some fun.”

“...”

Heivia gave her a murderous glare, so she winked.

“Do you understand your position now? The dead do not belong to any of the usual categories, so we can ignore all those pesky treaties and military regulations. Plus, any number of you can die without it counting in the official records. Ignore the people in their living rooms. You can fight as you like and die as you like! I’m honestly jealous! That’s the paradise dreamed of by any soldier!!”

In other words...

The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were being forced to wrap their arms around the pile of shit that the Information Alliance did not want to grab with their bare hands. Their target of attack could be a region of hopelessly fierce fighting, or a symbol of peace that was bound to earn international criticism. They did not want to imagine the other possibilities.

It was time for a true death march where they were lined up in a row and forced at gunpoint to walk through a minefield. Each step would be terrifying, but standing still would get them shot. Yes, the death march was more than just this one battle. They would never be released. Heivia and the others were disposable tools. This situation would continue endlessly until they were worn out and died.

“...What are you telling us to do?”

“It’s all about balance.” Taratua toyed with the end of her black hair that was damp despite the umbrella. “I’m sure you saw a lot on the Flagship 019. The Capulet AI Network that supports the Information Alliance, one of the four world powers, is correct but too pure. After all, after the New Yorker’s used various countermeasures to avoid security cameras and email spying, it was rendered unable to see New York itself. If the entire Martini Series in charge of maintenance returns a strange echo, it could create a similar flaw in Capulet. ...But that is not the problem.”

“?”

Taratua was supposedly a part of that Martini Series, but she did not seem worried about herself.

“As its name suggests, the Information Alliance rules everything with data. Nevertheless, we were not told anything about the risk to Capulet or about the Manhattan 000.”

“You’re pissed at being left out, so you want to take revenge by having us blow up New York?”

“Are you braindead? This is an opportunity,” whispered the black-haired beauty below the umbrella. “The Manhattan 000 is currently traveling south at around 388 knots. The distance from New York in the Information Alliance home country and the ocean near New Caribbean Island is about 3500 kilometers, so it should arrive within 4 or 5 hours. It’s still a mystery why they would send their king to the front line like this, but there is one thing we know for sure: we were blessed with a chance to gather raw data.”

388 knots was 700 kilometers per hour, so it was not much different from a passenger plane. What had happened to the city of Manhattan and the people in it?

The usual technical nerd was not here.

With nowhere to direct his question, Heivia just spat it out.

“700...? How?”

“At the very least, it must not be using an aircushion or static electricity floats. The colossal structure itself is parting the water. It’s probably using supercavitation or something to reduce the water’s resistance with small air bubbles, but the exact system is still unknown. This is all information we must find.”

That gigantic presence was staring them down from the darkness. Wasn’t that enough to sound instinctual alarm bells within any living creature?

And yet this girl had called it an opportunity.

“...Are you the kind of person who goes out to see the hurricane and gets blown away into the sky?”

“I will shoot you next time. What matters here is who can monopolize the most raw data available at the scene. As I said, the Information Alliance rules everything with data. The Manhattan 000 started moving and can apparently move under its own power whenever it wants. After we gather what data we can on it, we are not foolish enough to send all of it back to our higher ups, which includes the core-less Capulet AI Network. ...I mean, it already fired on all of you to cover its tracks.”

“Don’t drag us into your internal conflict.”

“Don’t be silly. Then I would have to take responsibility here.”

Even the simplest rules did not apply.

This was completely different from not having your words get through to someone. It was like emphatically speaking and even gesturing for emphasis only to see all that effort outright rejected. There was simply no opening in this girl. She was as inhuman as a giant praying mantis wearing human skin.

Was she an alien? Was she from the Shit Planet?

“They went to a lot of effort to hide this for so long. There must be some great secret to the Manhattan 000. And that would be very, very valuable information.”

Taratua giggled after glancing at the notebook-sized tablet she took from the subordinate holding the umbrella.

Was it showing a video site or online news? Or maybe the myriad posts on message boards and social media?

There was a lot of information related to Manhattan, but it was meaningless if none of it was accurate. When faced with a situation like this, it was the lowest of the low who could only think

about shouting strange apocalyptic theories or fabricating a witness account to gather views for their videos.

“After taking this much blame, I’m not going to obediently stand aside and stay a lowly Captain. I will provide myself with a path to special promotion. I’m sure all four world powers, both our enemies and the Information Alliance itself, are rushing to gather information. That’s perfect. Those onlookers will trip each other up and fail to gather anything of note. Meanwhile, we will move a step or two ahead. I will hold the valuable information on the Manhattan 000 and I will decide how to use it. Perhaps I will use AI and big data to join the upper class and enjoy a high society life of wealth. Or maybe I will threaten those people and use them as a stepping stone to an even more comfortable and leisurely life.”

“So it’s all about money? You sound just like the goddamn Capitalist Corporations.”

“Are you musty old nobles too stupid to tell the difference? The order is reversed. An information illiterate fool and their money are soon parted. When the poor hit the jackpot at the lottery, the story always has a tragic end. The truly powerful are those who first gather information. Whether or not they reveal their educational history, their occupation, the size of their bank account, and so on is all part of someone’s status.”

Heivia shook his head like he was hungover.

He may have given up on trying to understand the thought process of this thinly-smiling resident of Shit Planet.

“And the problem there is balance.”

But how did Taratua view these disposable Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers?

She looked down on the rain-soaked group from her position of safety.

“Hopefully, the four world powers will begin a mutual game of whack-a-mole that keeps any of them from popping up. The danger is if one of them manages to stay up. I want to restrict their data acquisition speed. That way we alone can grasp these secrets and use them as exclusive bargaining chips against the higher, higher, higher ups. So if any of those moles pops up, we need to whack them back down. Even if our target is from the Information Alliance, we still must thoroughly destroy them. Even more so for outsiders.”

This was sounding ominous.

Heivia, Myonri, and the rest tensed up as Taratua spun the notebook-sized tablet around so they could see the screen.

And it showed...

“A symbol of peace: the Olympia Dome□”

“Bff...!?”

She was broken.

She was completely insane.

“That artificial floating island travels slowly around the Atlantic and hosts the Technopics global sports festival. It officially claims to be fully neutral and not affiliated with any world power, but it is actually heavily dyed in the colors of the Faith Organization. And since it needs to broadcast an international event, it is equipped with largescale broadcast equipment. That makes it a gigantic EM spy device wandering across the Atlantic. It doesn't really matter whether or not it was originally built for that purpose. It has ended up that way. It is in our way. You need to whack down that mole so it doesn't discover the Manhattan 000's secrets before we do. Blow it up and sink it.”

“...That's against the rules. You want us to sink the site of the Technopics with military might? That would turn into an international incident requiring centuries of reparations!!”

“That isn't part of the calculation. Even if you're right, I won't be the one paying them. Why do you think I've kept you dangerous Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers alive this long? Now get to work, my dead soldiers□”

She made it sound so simple.

If this was an operation that could be pulled off with the normal methods, she would not have put together this unstable enemy unit of zombie soldiers. She was not expecting Heivia and the others to fight valiantly. They were being used as jokers to whom the rules did not apply specifically because she did not care when they were destroyed either legally or physically.

Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks smiled thinly.

“Luckily, all of our maintenance fleet's ships were at least half-destroyed by the Manhattan 000's attack. No one will suspect a thing if a few of them lose control and start to drift. You assisted a stranded Capitalist Corporations' submarine for no reward, didn't you? This will be the same. The rules of the sea are kind. So we'll use that to our advantage by getting the Olympia Dome to assist you so you can crush them from within.”

Heivia tried to continue arguing, but Taratua gently raised a hand.

The sailors surrounding them lazily aimed shotguns at the curled-up Legitimacy Kingdom dumplings. Heivia might or might not be killed when the first trigger was pulled, but once it began, the number of survivors would be quickly reduced.

Refusal was not an option.

If they disobeyed, they would receive a bullet to the head. If they obeyed, they would be used as disposable elements of ridiculous missions. Even if they managed to win and survive, they would not be freed; they would simply be sent out on the next mission. The death march would continue until every last one of them was dead.

The Asian beauty gently lowered her hand and grinned.

“Do you understand the rules now? Then begin.”

“...Wait.”

A low voice spoke.

It was Heivia as the pouring rain continued to hit him.

“You’re the only one that gains anything from that. It’s not worth our while. We’re risking our life on a deadly attack with guns aimed at our backs. There has to be something in it for us.”

“Using data to achieve a fortune only applies to those in the Information Alliance. Or are you saying you will defect to our side to share in the profits here?”

“Not what I meant,” spat out Heivia. “I’m not interested in your dirty money.”

And he said it.

“Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. Once this is all over, hand that bitch over to us. Those are our terms.”

The tall girl silently tilted her head.

She rubbed at her shiny black hair as she finally answered.

“What do I gain by accepting that? Depending on your answer, I might just return you to your grave.”

"You're both from the Martini Series, aren't you? Keep her with you and your share is divided in half."

"Then you can kill her if you want."

She said it so easily.

Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks may have had no concept of camaraderie.

No.

Dorothea, Piranirie, and Wraith.

Even that small blonde girl had lost the guarantee of the safety myth. So was it safe to conclude it was a general trait of the Martini Series as a whole? The one question was whether that was a mistake at the design phase or if it was the result of an outside force taking advantage of a vulnerability.

The tall Asian beauty concluded the briefing with a carefree look.

"So we have a deal! Now, 101st Zombie Platoon, this is your first mission, so it is a cause for celebration. It's time for a true bloodbath mission!"

Part 5

The Frigate 042 was tossed about by the nearly-black gray of the stormy sea. It was about 100 meters long. It would have originally been neatly painted the mix of light gray and blue associated with warships, but large parts had been scorched black and the surface had bubbled up like someone had held a match to the back of a photograph. The rapid-firing guns were bent, the vertical-launch missile tubes lined up like a honeycomb were melted shut, and most of the various antennae had been blown off of the bridge. The entire ship was tilted at an angle, so it was clearly in no state for cruising. If an empty-headed youth came across it in a cruiser, they might snap a photo with their smartphone and create a new ghost ship legend.

Its tragic state was a testament to the power of the Manhattan 000's ultra-wide-range attacks.

"...This is the worst, goddammit."

Inside the ship, Heivia Winchell spat out his words while sitting with his back to the wall and an assault rifle in his arms. He and the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were inside the mess hall that was one of the larger intact areas.

"I'm a noble heir, but those bastards rewrote the records to report me as dead. Those old men with giant beards, fat asses, or both have got to be fighting over the right of succession back in the home country. And who knows what's happened to the relationship between the Winchell and Vanderbilt families..."

"Ch-cheer up, Heivia. We just have to wait for an opportunity."

"You sure are hopeful, Myonri. Do you really think there will be one? With those pieces of shit watching our every move!?"

The zombie-like soldiers slowly turned their attention in the direction Heivia pointed.

There, a single pair of non-matching uniforms stood out from the rest.

It was the Information Alliance officer Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

And the young man who acted as her aide.

"I doubt you'll trust anything I say at this point. ...But it's even harder for me to trust myself. Just like with the Capulet AI Network, the Martini Series can't make judgments about itself."

"..."

"By spreading its influence thinly out across all of the Information Alliance's territory of influence, Capulet lost any symbol of a 'core'. Piranirie said she had succumbed to the AI's correctness, but it is hard to say she had no confidence in her actions. I don't know what it is that is destroying us, but it may be using our active self-denial."

"Active...self-denial?"

Myonri looked confused and Wraith nodded.

"Like giving up on climbing a mountain because of a blizzard. Or making a courageous withdrawal. ...It depends on the person's willpower, but people have a strange mindset where the stronger their desire, the further they move from their initial objective. That is why Piranirie charged full speed toward her own destruction."

The blonde girl sighed in the heavy atmosphere.

"Our original, Cassandra Martini, was apparently a rational killer. She must have chosen to give up on so much in the course of that life. If Katarina were here, she might have been able to corroborate

that.”

She was acting differently from her previous chatting.

There may have been an absolute difference between Wraith and Heivia’s group.

Of course, Heivia’s group was in charge of hesitantly walking onto the minefield while Wraith’s group was in charge of firing into their backs the instant they took issue with Heivia’s group’s speed or anything else.

“(I can’t believe Taratua. She’s actually sending our reward out into battle with us. Does she see it like shaking a carrot on a stick in front of the dumb horse?)”

“What’s this? You’re acting awfully suspicious here. Did you ask for my head as a reward for this mission?”

“Tch.”

Heivia hatefully clicked his tongue.

It did not matter if she found out here. The secret deal was with Taratua. Even if that girl was broken on a fundamental level, she could still do the math. In other words, she was a high-IQ serial killer. Her “emotions” could not be overturned even if Wraith went crying to her now. It did not matter that they were comrades.

Meanwhile, Wraith sighed.

“You’re apparently clinging to hope to an ugly extent, but that’s fine with me. You can think about what comes afterwards if you like, but don’t lose sight of the immediate hurdle. Taratua has very good reason to be cautious of Olympia Dome. First, if the Manhattan 000 is headed for us, there is a good chance that wandering artificial floating island will pass very close by. Second, the Faith Organization is sending soldiers and equipment to that symbol of peace. Primarily STOL transport planes and tiltrotors. This isn’t over once we get inside with this Trojan horse. Learn how to use the Information Alliance equipment we have lent you. You need to act like you stole it from this half-destroyed ship. Also...”

“Shut up. That’s enough.”

Heivia rudely cut her off.

His tone with her was clearly different from just a few hours before.

“How long are you going to act like we’re on the same side? There’s a really obvious line in the sand now. And you drew it your damn self. You sicken me. Don’t think you can just move from one side to the other whenever you damn well please. It pisses me off even though I know it’s coming from a completely broken lunatic.”

“...Do you think growing emotional is a virtue? I’ll admit it’s pure to a fault, but do you actually plan on surviving this?”

“How the hell can you say that after taking his life with your own hands!? Do you really think you’re the hero? Have you gone as nuts as Joan of Arc? Say it yourself: who do you think it was that shot Quenser to save her own hide!?”

The girl’s shoulders shook at the blatant verbal abuse.

Her already-small body shrank down all the more, but her eyes opened unbelievably wide.

Her lips trembled as she tried to say something. They opened and closed, but nothing ever came out.

“Say it, crazy girl.”

There was now a definite focus to Heivia’s previously gloomy eyes.

There may have been nothing rational there. There was someone here he had reason to criticize, so he may have simply been using that as an outlet.

His back left the wall, he slowly stood up, and a bright light glinted in his eyes as he roared at her.

“Sure, you probably did the right thing!! You probably used that clever head of yours to work out the optimal solution and that told you to shoot Quenser!! So how about you hold your head high? After killing so many people, did you think you could become the tragic heroine who gets tears in her eyes and laments how hard it was for her!? That wouldn’t make him happy. That wouldn’t make Quenser happy. Did you really think anyone would accept that, you piece of shit!?”

“...”

“Do you remember what happened when that damn Manhattan fired on us?”

Wraith remained motionless, so Heivia kept up the verbal assault.

He seemed to be saying he would not forgive her even if her heart lay in tatters.

“He protected you. That skinny bastard threw himself over you to protect your tiny body from whatever was going to happen. It’s true that was right after everything with Piranirie, so he’d just experienced a kid dying. ...But the fact remains that he protected you. Do you know what that means? That softhearted idiot didn’t want you to die and he thought he could trust you to have his back! And then you-...!!!!!”

There was a small movement.

It may have been similar to a small child trying to cover their head as an unreasonable adult shouted angrily down at them.

But in Wraith’s case, her small hand hovered near the holster on her hip.

The blonde girl winced as if that fact pained her, but Heivia gave a broken, asymmetrical grin.

“...That’s who you really are. A crazed killer. And I’m not talking about that active self-denial or some strange mindset. I’m talking about the very nature of your soul. You can claim to support equality or pacifism all you like, but the first hint of a threat and this happens. If you aren’t on top, you can’t relax or even look the other person in the eye. There was no other choice? You’re just a child, so you aren’t responsible? Then you shouldn’t have stretched up on your tiptoes to set foot on the battlefield. None of this would’ve happened if you hadn’t participated in that genius girl project.”

He had started on what-ifs that had no bearing on reality.

But Heivia did not care since he was only interested in finding fault.

So he did not hold back.

“You should’ve stayed back in your safe country hiding behind your mommy’s skirt.”

This was even more than before.

Everyone watching could tell the girl’s pale face grew another shade closer to pure white. It was easy to imagine how tightly her heart was squeezing inside her juvenile body.

Heivia had to have heard Quenser and Wraith’s conversation on the Flagship 019.

He would have heard about the DNA computer spread out across the Information Alliance, he would have heard about the Anastasia Processor at its core, and he would have heard whose cancer cells were used to create it.

He would have heard about that impossible what-if where the girl would never have had to take the Martini name and would have been protected by a normal, warm family if not for her mother's sickness.

But he still said it.

He did not care. He only saw her as an enemy.

A military boot could be heard scraping against the floor.

The young man ever-present by Wraith's side had taken a step forward while tightly clenching his teeth.

"Get back to jerking off in front of the position-detection camera with some VR goggles on, you Information Alliance pervert. Did you think you could become her knight now that Quenser's dead?"

Heivia did not back down.

In fact, he immediately stepped forward so they were less than a meter apart.

"What a gentleman you are for bothering to stand up over nothing more than an exchange of words. Well? Am I supposed to fight to the death without a single complaint even after being given legit bullets? Is that how you think a gentleman should act? Go fuck yourself!!!!!"

Next, there were several dull sounds of impacts that crushed flesh and struck the bone.

First, the young man's iron fist hit Heivia's cheekbone. Heivia retaliated by grabbing at him. The rest was too chaotic to describe. The two of them knocked over the mess hall's tables and chairs as they rolled along the floor to get on top of the other. All the while, dull and potentially deadly sounds rang out and dark red drops of blood scattered around.

"...Stop."

Wraith Martini Vermouthsray moved her trembling lips to force out the word.

Neither Heivia nor the young man was listening.

The Legitimacy Kingdom boy grabbed a glass ashtray from the floor and the Information Alliance mechanical man reached for the pin of a grenade hanging from the delinquent soldier's jacket. Seeing that, Wraith finally made up her mind.

“Stop this!!”

She had drawn it.

She drew her handgun from the holster.

The atmosphere froze. A decisive chasm had opened between the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance. If that grenade had detonated, those two and all those gathered in the enclosed mess hall would have been killed. But no one was focused on that.

Everyone there - and that probably included Wraith herself - had pictured something else entirely.

They vividly saw that scene of someone shooting someone else on the tilted flight deck.

“...Do whatever you want.” Heivia recklessly threw his hands up while the young man leaned down on him. “You have two options here. One: if the mission fails, you’ll be filled with lead at Olympia Dome along with us. Two: if the mission succeeds, Taratua will sell you to us. ...There’s no way out for you. Your life is already over, crazy girl.”

That was the end of it.

The young man swung his fist down into the center of Heivia’s face and the unfunny idiot’s consciousness was swiftly taken from him.

Part 6

“Naval Security Sigma 3 to all. We have reached the unidentified ship. It has been sending out a distress signal...but it isn’t responding to our radio transmissions, flashing light signals, or loudspeaker calls. Please advise.”

“This is OD Control. Wait, Sigma 3. Olympia Dome lacks the authority to board and raid ships.”

“Sigma 3. Isn’t it already within 200 nautical miles?”

“OD Control. An artificial floating island cannot claim territorial waters or an exclusive economic zone. Also, Olympia Dome is neutral in every possible way.”

“(How can you say that after letting in Faith Organization troops like us?)”

“OD Control here. State your call sign before speaking, Sigma 3. We can only board ships that have already sunk. That one is still floating, isn’t it? As planned, attach the buffering material and then let

the waves carry it into the dock.”

“Sigma 3. They aren’t controlling the rudder or decelerating. This might destroy the harbor block.”

“OD Control. Unlike a normal harbor, an artificial floating island can alter its direction and speed. That means we can match our speed to theirs. If they aren’t moving, we just have to move.”

“Sigma 3 to all. Starboard bow complete.”

“Theta 7. Port middle complete.”

“Phi 2. Starboard stern complete.”

“Psi 4. Starboard middle complete.”

“Delta 9. Port stern complete.”

“Sigma 3 to Lambda 1. What happened to the port bow?”

“...”

“Lambda 1!”

“Zeta 0 to Sigma 3. Lambda 1 has a phobia of sharks and micro bikinis. It’s all thanks to being swept out to sea when a carnivorous young woman licked her lips and devoured his virginity on a rubber boat. He’s probably off trembling somewhere right now.”

“Sigma 3. How is that traumatic? I’m jealous as hell. I lost mine to the old lady at the cigarette store. I’ll make up for his absence.”

“OD Control here. Trouble, Sigma 3?”

“Sigma 3. Nothing worth saving to the control recorder.”

“OD Control. Then stop discussing your virginites. Just so you know, I’m still afraid of holes in walls. Specifically ones just big enough to hold a nice breakfast banana.”

“Sigma 3 here. Shut up. And we’re done now anyway. What even happened to that cool-headed operator woman? Anyway, match their speed and catch them softly. Softly!”

“OD Control. You don’t have to shout. This entire rescue operation would be pointless if the impact was strong enough to kill the people inside.”

“(Curse these softhearted people who only know peace. Makes it hard to fight a war.)”

“OD Control here. Use your call sign, Sigma 3.”

Part 7

“Thanks for the help” was all they could say.

“Let’s get started.”

On Heivia’s word, the battle began.

Once the Faith Organization had firmly affixed the ship to the harbor block, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes kicked open the bent metal door and rushed out toward the edge of the deck with assault rifles and carbines in hand.

Their first target was the concrete wharf area about 9 meters down from the starboard side of the ship.

A continuous hail of bullets filled the armed Faith Organization soldiers with holes. While exposed to the recoil of the gunfire, Heivia was honestly relieved that they were professional soldiers. If these were simply Olympia Dome staff, this would have been a nightmare.

This was in line with the information they had been given, but he had not been trained to the point that he would thank Taratua for anything. He gave a shout while ducking behind the thick metal panel attached to the railing to swap out his assault rifle’s magazine.

“There’s a sniper on the gantry crane! And if the gathered soldiers start to move apart, that’s the sign for a rocket. Destroy them first!!”

This time, Heivia had a separate shotgun attached below his rifle’s barrel. By swapping between real and rubber bullets, he could neutralize the harmless workers without killing them. Of course, this had nothing to do with mercy or philanthropy. ...It was an efficiency optimization policy that used that “kindness” to lighten the soldier’s trigger finger.

“Don’t get your ammo type mixed up, Myonri. You won’t just get a red or white flag for it!”

“I know that!!”

They exchanged fire for a while, but the Legitimacy Kingdom's chances of taking the wharf area did not look promising. They would have their best chance when their opponent was surprised by this unexpected attack, but Olympia Dome was the Faith Organization's home turf and they held all the advantageous ground. Once they recovered from their shock, it would be the Legitimacy Kingdom's turn to be overwhelmed.

"Is turning the entire slug into a rubber bullet really a humanitarian measure?" asked Myonri.

"It's mostly just an excuse to yourself. Even if the enemy finds it silly, they can't respond to the double tactics. Meanwhile, our trigger fingers are a lot lighter since we 'might not kill them', so our efficiency rises. It's the same as the Island Nation's concept of 'striking with the back of the blade'. There's apparently a theory that the samurai could attack so boldly because katanas weren't double-edged."

So before they were overwhelmed, they had to thoroughly strike the enemy and secure a foothold on land.

This was an away game and they knew in advance the enemy had more personnel and equipment. They had to throw them off their pace and break through regardless.

Heivia's group's enemies were not just those in front of them. They had been warned in advance that they would be shot in the back if they fell behind schedule.

Black-uniformed Wraith was hiding behind a different steel panel from the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes and she shouted at them while pointing toward the area with the most intense counterattack. She was the overall supervisor who was the only one allowed to shoot Heivia's group in the back. And if Heivia's group tried to retaliate, they would of course be executed by gunfire. Their actions were restricted by both force and military regulations.

"Avoiding work seems to be the only thing you fools are good at, but set up more of a barrage! I want to throw some more of these things while I can!!"

"Shut up and die, dead-end girl! Will those toys really accomplish anything...!?"

If he did not have to hit, he did not have to expose himself to danger. Heivia kept his body hidden behind the steel panel and stuck only his assault rifle up to randomly spray bullets down. And that made him one of the harder workers. Some of the soldiers were busy "pretending" by creating fake muzzle flashes with a strobe light and speaker linked together. It sounded silly, but unlike in movies, real battles did not have unlimited ammunition. That was a surprisingly handy item for conserving bullets.

"...The creep toward technology has already begun."

“Oh.” Myonri sounded oddly cheerful. “It looks like those things have started to move.”

Behind her steel panel, Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had a focused look on her face as she operated something with both hands. The device looked like a smartphone with a sold-separately H-shaped game pad attached.

No, that may have been exactly what it was.

Something the size of a baseball silently rolled around the Faith Organization’s cover and into their hiding spot.

Immediately, an explosion erupted behind cover as if a fragmentary grenade had gone off there.

The lethal range was 5 meters and the incapacitation range was 10 meters, but those basic specs barely mattered. After a sudden explosion within the wall or vehicle they were hiding within, the people relying on that shield would be blown to bits.

“Wah!? Wha-!?”

Other Faith Organization soldiers behind nearby cover cried out in panic before they were blown away by other explosions that resembled dirty smokescreens. Some soldiers decided they could not stay where they were and rolled out from behind their shields, but Heivia and Myonri picked them off with bullets.

“Remote grenades that can roll along the ground and behind cover? How cruel can you get...?”

“Those simply incorporate the tech from sticky tape cleaning robots, don’t they?”

That was the identity of the devices Wraith had thrown earlier. After scattering the spherical explosives around the targets, you could control their exact locations with a smartphone or tablet. You rolled them behind the enemy’s cover and stealthily detonated them at the defenseless enemy’s feet. They could also be thrown over a prison’s thick walls and sent through a vent to explore the ducts.

“Should we really be relying on tech like this?” asked Heivia.

“They aren’t IoT devices, so they won’t be connected to Capulet,” replied Wraith. “Besides, unmanned weapons run on systems even more simplified than a pet robot. They won’t rely on an AI network.”

“Eh? Really?” asked Myonri.

“It’s true it would take a server with massive capacity to fully reproduce the flowchart for the predetermined movement patterns of the wings and legs of a single fly. ...But what if we were in the middle of nowhere with nothing artificial as far as the eye could see? An unmanned weapon would be useless if it needed to constantly send out signals to inform a server of its location. The ideal form of modern unmanned weapons is generally a submarine. It only sends out a signal when absolutely necessary. Capulet might want to connect to everything and suck up all the data it can get, but even it has to make concessions here.”

Black-uniformed Wraith gave them the pitying look of a teacher to a poor student.

“They use the Insect Colony Theory that takes artificial creatures that learn and construct the simplest ways to move a spider or butterfly’s body and combines it with the swarm intelligence that uses machines to reproduce the social structures of ants and bees. That allows them to communicate and take the optimal action without the need for a server. This is an ideal. Just like a grazing herd, the group of unmanned weapons automatically works toward a single goal while we are the sheepdog who watches on and intervenes only when necessary.”

“That all sounds wonderful, but I’m more afraid of you going nuts than the machines!” shouted Heivia. “Are you sure this is okay!?”

This was somehow different from Quenser who had shaped bombs with his own hands and used them to realize his clever ideas.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray’s explosions were merciless and unemotional.

It felt like she was trapping the enemy and efficiently killing them.

A motor that sounded a lot like an electric shaver passed by over their heads. They did not bother looking up. It was an aerial drone shaped like a four-winged water strider. Instead of just flying in a straight line, those things would include figure-eight movements, perhaps to divert the enemy’s aim.

Or was it a form of non-EM communication between the unmanned weapons?

It was thanks to these drones that the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had been able to so accurately fire on the Faith Organization soldiers immediately after opening the metal doors. Intelligence was the greatest weapon. The battle was decided before the bullets and knives began to fly. It really was the Information Alliance’s style.

Wraith pointed at the drones being tossed about by the storm.

“If we have them self-destruct at an altitude of 50 meters and rain shrapnel down on the enemy’s head, we should be able to secure a route to C Dock. We need to reach land before enemy reinforcements arrive. Don’t be slow.”

“It doesn’t really matter, but...hey, watch out! Get down, Myonri!!”

Perhaps because of the powerful storm, some of shrapnel downpour reached the ship’s deck as well. After they were nearly decorated with some delicious plastic and rare earth seasoning, Heivia tried to grab at Wraith, but Myonri held him back. A single retort could get them reduced to a bloody pulp right now.

At the moment, time was of the essence.

No gangway had been nicely attached for them, but the actual docking work had been completed. If they descended the ropes attached to the railing, they could reach the concrete wharf area they had stained with blood a moment before.

They were not searching out each other’s position in the jungle or anything, but just to be sure, Heivia made sure not to step in any of the blood.

“I’ve got a pretty good idea of what kind of shitty tactics the Information Alliance uses, but what about the Faith Organization?”

“Guts maybe?” suggested Myonri. “Like making a gutsy charge?”

Just as Heivia dismissed that as ridiculous, the wall of a nearby warehouse broke open from within. A gigantic firetruck for fuel oil fires had crashed through.

“I don’t know if it’s for bulletproofing, but they’ve attached a thick wire mesh over the glass. And it’s not just handmade. It’s just like the ‘observation helicopters’ owned by a certain environment protection group. That thing was designed to accommodate this attachment!!”

But that was not the biggest problem. Soldiers were clinging to the sides and roof of the boxy vehicle. They looked like countless ants swinging around a sugar cube. Before Heivia’s group even did anything, some of the soldiers were caught on the jagged edges of the warehouse wall or had their uniforms caught in the giant tires, turning them to mincemeat.

It was tank desant.

“Huh, so it is guts,” said Heivia.

“Definitely guts,” replied Myonri.

Regardless, Heivia raised a hand and one of their allies fired a shoulder-fired anti-tank missile. More than 10 Faith Organization soldiers were blown away like the contents of a jack-in-the-box.

“Shit, they’re still alive!?”

They must have mastered the use of willpower and guts because the soldiers lying on the road or on top of the warehouse roof still fired toward the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers.

But that was not why Heivia’s group quickly dove behind rusty metal drums and wooden boxes.

“What is with them...? They’re firing something else along with their bullets.”

“Probably collapsible bows. They take a more arching path than rifle bullets, so be on your guard even when behind cover. It’s the same as you diligent and clever lot using both rifle bullets and rubber bullets. Individually, they wouldn’t be that effective, but mix them in and the enemy has to perform more mental gymnastics.”

“That’s not what I was talking about, crazy girl. Look at the arrowhead over there. Why have they rubbed seagull shit all over it!?”

“Maybe as a form of poison arrow? They probably hope to increase the damage done by shoving germs into the wound. The military use of rotten corpses and excrement is an effective strategy that has been used since BCE times.”

“Heivia, look at that on the road over there,” said Myonri. “Wow, I don’t want to see that at all. Isn’t that just the worst!?”

“Don’t just say ‘that’! Explain what it is!! ...!? W-wait, you’re kidding, right? Not dogshit!”

It did not at all look like they were kidding and little Wraithy did not want a face full of dogshit, so she threw a baseball-sized explosive. The blonde girl operated her smartphone’s H-shaped game pad while hiding behind cover to blow up the Faith Organization soldier groaning on the ground 20 meters away.

“You idiot!! You just scattered dogshit and human entrails everywhere!! Be more careful!!”

“I feel like this is turning into biological warfare,” commented Myonri.

Just then, they sensed what seemed like a sound but was not. A slight vibration reached their feet from the ground.

They frowned.

“What’s this? Cheering from a stadium?”

“Why would it be that?” asked Myonri. “I thought this city was essentially dead except during the Technopics.”

“Can you professionals not even find a scientific explanation of the occult?” complained Wraith. “The winds and waves of the storm may be causing a resonance within the artificial floating island. It is not rooted in the actual earth, so looking at the overall ratio, it must be thinner than a pizza.”

“Don’t butt in, Loli Grim Reaper. I’m not a pedo or a necro.”

“There’s no need to lie.”

“And don’t just smile and say things like that, Myonri! People will think it’s true!!”

But in reality, a powerful vibration erupted in the distance and reached them like someone had scored a decisive point near the end of a soccer game. There was no way this was a natural phenomenon. The sound of mayhem had human intent behind it.

“...So is it really guts after all?” asked Myonri, sounding annoyed.

“Curse those perverted mythology fetishists. Did they start some self-loving to blow through the limiters in their minds!?”

The digital vs. analog war had finally begun.

Heivia’s group was not trying to remain in C Dock and protect the ship with their lives, so they had no reason to stay in place and put up a thorough resistance. Instead, they moved elsewhere.

Wraith looked up from her customized smartphone.

“Our objective is the broadcast station where most of the communication equipment is. We can ignore the broadcast tower and parabolic antennae. As long as we destroy the core, they can’t manage the exchange of information and that other equipment will be useless.”

“Wait, that’s not what we discussed. I thought that Martini sister you love so much was talking about sinking the whole damn island. Unlike you, we could get executed by Taratua if we make a single wrong move!”

“I can’t believe how little you can adapt to the situation... What does it matter what she hopes for? Can your poor little mind do nothing more than what it’s told? Besides, we don’t even know if it’s possible to sink Olympia Dome as a whole with the equipment we’re carrying. Most of its power is supplied by the generator satellite in orbit and the transformer ships in the ocean, so we can’t expect to trigger any explosives within Olympia Dome. The Faith Organization military infiltrating

the artificial floating island doesn't matter. Our top priority is robbing the Manhattan 000 of the ability to gather information."

"Sure, sure. How kind of you. Such a pillar of charity. Is that the spirit of Nightingale I see hovering behind you? I'm sure Quenser is weeping for joy in the afterlife right now, you piece of shit."

The aide young man punched Heivia and Heivia returned the favor.

Before it devolved into a serious grapple, timid Myonri aimed her assault rifle at those allies to restore order.

"This isn't supposed to be my job!" she protested. "Wraith, please manage our people better!"

"R-right..."

"Just shoot him, you idiot!" shouted Heivia. "Whose side are you on, anyway!?"

"If you don't quiet down, I will fire rubber bullets into your balls. Then the rest of us can keep moving while the two of you bond over your shared experience. Nonlethal weapons sure are convenient, aren't they?"

She was smiling.

Was she aware that rubber or not made little difference when it came to balls? Myonri seemed to have awoken to her calling as a fearsome Black Uniform. This was another example of how frightening serious girls were when they got mad.

"...Is there some kind of special campaign in effect this month? When did plain old Myonri transform into this shiny ultra-rare?"

"I imagine it was the result of everyone's daily treatment of me."

"You have some nerve, Myonri. What good is an ultra-rare if you aren't even going to show any more skin?"

"That's what I'm talking about! Everything about your treatment of me is the worst!!"

They left the harbor block and entered the outer city region.

It was probably due to the thick storm clouds overhead, but the city looked very gray in the pouring rain.

“Are you sure we aren’t dragging civilians into this...?”

“There are apparently no athletes or spectators here except during the Technopics. The only civilians are the Olympia Dome inspection and maintenance staff. The city’s population density is less than 8%, so there’s very little chance of a stray bullet causing any harm.”

“I read you loud and clear: we don’t actually know anything for sure and we need to be careful if we want to avoid a nightmare later on.”

They heard the dull sound of several thick tires tearing at the ground. Garbage trucks and mobile cranes drove out from intersections and parking garages like crocodiles poking their heads out of the bushes. Soldiers covered them like a packed train in Southeast Asia, and...

“Oh, no! They’ve attached heavy weaponry with bolts and slide rails!!”

“Look how perfectly those fit. This is clearly how they were designed to look. They just normally have the equipment removed so those look like civilian equipment!! With the infrastructure support of a frontline base, they’re just military weapons!!”

In this case, it was heavy machineguns instead of construction equipment. If Heivia’s group remained standing in that wide-open six-lane road the size of a runway, they would have their torsos torn in half by a horizontal flash of light.

Driven on by the deep booms of gunfire, Heivia’s group broke the window to one of the shops lining the road and fled indoors.

Only after rushing inside did they realize it was a trendy bar.

“Damn, this is no time to let a horizontal stream of bullets hold us in place. They’ve broken through the limiters in their minds to free themselves from the fear of death. They’re sure to charge in at us!!”

“Do not worry, cowardly expert. This beautiful and kind young woman will wear down their numbers for you.”

Wraith sounded oddly confident. Thinking back, Heivia recalled that her aide had fired a 25mm grenade launcher straight up several times as they ran.

Or...?

“Parachute deployment confirmed. We have access to all rounds. None were lost. We can begin at any time.”

“Understood, Frank. Mark the heat readings around the engines and start by blowing away all of the modified vehicles.”

It happened after a 10 second delay.

A deafening explosion erupted outside with enough force to drown out the deep gunshots of the heavy machineguns that reverberated in their stomachs. And it was not just the one. Wraith’s smartphone was linked with the cameras of the grenades slowly swept up by the blasts, so when she set their targets, the explosives released their own parachutes, used their small wings for course corrections, and fell directly on the garbage trucks and mobile cranes with pinpoint accuracy. Their guidance was perfect despite the storm and the speed of the vehicles.

“Exactly the scary stuff I would expect from a crazy girl...” grumbled Heivia as he realized what it meant that the heavy machineguns had been entirely silenced.

Those grenades could be fired at random and individually locked onto targets later on. That was not something he could freely celebrate. He hated to think what would happen if they showed up in the enemy’s hands. This was an urban battlefield with roofs for protection, but an attack from above would be devastating out on an open field.

But Wraith herself did not seem delighted with her incredible results.

“Instead of worrying about their obvious active forces, you should focus on their passive enemy-location infrastructure. In other words, how did they know where we were? The Faith Organization is supposed to be dangerous in a simple way, but have they moved past their outdated analog warfare? Unless we take out their ‘eyes’, they’ll quickly reclaim the initiative.”

The stadium cheering erupted from unexpectedly close by.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“They’re coming. And they’ll have learned to hold back their special pieces to avoid having them crushed by explosives.”

“Wh-what does that mean?” asked Myonri.

“They’ll push in with overwhelming numbers! They’ll use their allies as shields and climb over the corpses!!”

When she heard Heivia’s words, Wraith took out one of the serverless remote grenades she had used at the harbor block and placed it among the jumble of drink bottles behind the counter.

Then they all left through the back exit.

They could not deny the fear of facing more heavy weaponry, so they did their best to choose the alleyways and small roads that garbage trucks, mobile cranes, and other large vehicles could not drive down.

“Keep an eye on the windows above and the manholes below. Urban areas that can’t be leveled are crucibles of death...”

Wraith ignored Heivia’s words and used her smartphone to check the camera footage from the remote grenade she had set up. A crowd resembling a rioting mob more than soldiers flooded inside the shop through the door and the broken window and trampled everything within.

Wraith spotted a distinctive tattoo on the backs of their hands.

“Aztec? ...No, it’s Mayan, but is that an even older god?” The blonde girl gently rubbed her slender chin with her empty hand. “We can’t take them lightly just because they’re from an ancient civilization. Their largescale stone architectures and accurate astronomy was supported by a high-level of scientific learning. Their idea of crafting giant structures with an accurate hand could apply to modern Object development.”

“Can you look up how to use the ultimate magic with that thing? If not, it’s a waste of time. What a joke.”

The young man responded by quietly clenching his fist and showing off his large bicep bulge, so Wraith kicked her aide in the shin without even looking up from her smartphone. She had learned how to put a stop to it by now. Blonde 12-year-old girls had endless possibility for growth.

“W-Wraith, can you at least look up from that screen?” suggested Myonri. “Handle it so halfheartedly and you’ll probably make him feel bad. This isn’t much of a reward.”

“It’s a good lesson for him. This is what happens when he tries to speak for someone as lovely as me with his dimwitted and sweaty masculinity.”

One of the many soldiers in the shop seemed to have noticed the camera, so Wraith tapped the screen to swiftly detonate the remote grenade. The screen simply displayed the text “Access Lost”, but there had actually been an explosion in the middle of that crowd. Small metal balls only a few millimeters across had been scattered in every direction to take lives as efficiently as possible.

“The drones flying above have detected the movement of a different unit. Simply fleeing will not shake them.”

“How many?”

“First of all, about 200 managed to pass through the bar and are pursuing us from behind.”

“...Hey, do you have so many brain chemicals pumping that you’ve forgotten how to do math?” complained Heivia. “We’re lucky if we still have 50 people. An enemy four times our size is too much.”

“And there are more than 300 approaching up ahead. The enemy is about 10 times our size and who can say how much larger it will grow.”

Regardless of the soldiers’ skill and equipment, the difference in numbers was simply too great. They had already used up the advantage provided by a surprise attack, so at this rate, they would be ganged up on and slaughtered.

While Wraith relayed this information with her smartphone in one hand, she pulled a few disks from her pocket and threw them. They were a little larger than movie disks and, when they fell to the ground, they came apart on their own and transformed into meter-long serpentine robots. It was unclear how closely their structure matched that of a snake, but when the head portion tapped against the ground, was it reading the heat to communicate with the other units?

“The worst case is to be trapped between two forces on this small road. Staying on this annoyingly straight path would be the absolute worst plan. It would be better to move out onto the major road to include a lateral vector to our path. We should bend the battle line so we’re only being attacked from a single direction.”

“U-umm, are those robots explosives too?” asked Myonri.

The robots wriggled like endoscopes as they either wrapped around vertical pipes to climb to the rooftops or slipped underground through the small holes in manholes.

Wraith answered with her eyes still on her smartphone screen.

“No, these are high-speed cameras. The cameras themselves have been made quite small by making them mirrorless, but blurring is a major issue. They can somewhat correct using their gyros, but then there’s no point in making them high speed. The engineers are apparently still having a hard time making flying versions.”

“Cameras...?”

“Yes. In an away game like this, we can’t help but be outnumbered. So to make up for what we lack, I was thinking we could play some soccer. Baseball and basketball would work just as well. As long as we have viewpoints from around 32 directions on the X, Y, and Z axes, we should manage well enough.”

“???”

Part 8

“Goddamn them...!!”

Sigma 3, real name Robinson King-Cole, groaned within the rubble of the harbor block. They had tried to be very cautious, but this was the result as soon as that crumbling ship entered C Dock. The zombies had flooded out from the Trojan horse and bared their fangs against the symbol of peace known as the Olympia Dome. It had been quickly transformed into a battlefield reeking of gun smoke and blood.

The large Hispanic man looked up at the crumbling ship that was more than 9 meters tall. The ship itself seemed to be from the Information Alliance, but the flag raised above it was the Legitimacy Kingdom's.

“Sigma 3 to OD Control. Who are they!? Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers that captured an Information Alliance ship, Information Alliance soldiers disguising themselves as the Legitimacy Kingdom, or someone else altogether!?”

Many varieties of rifle and shotgun cartridges were lying around. Yet normally there would be a single standard used within a unit.

(There's so much evidence here, but it feels like that's actually obscuring the truth. It's always like this when the Information Alliance's name pops up!!)

Robinson felt a physiological disgust at a level above reason, but that may have been because he belonged to the Faith Organization that saw value in a single absolute truth. He simply could not understand the people who used post-truth politics and fake news to muddy the truth and make all sorts of noise.

After regrouping with some fellow soldiers who had also arrived on personal watercraft, they ran along the dock, checked the pulses of their collapsed allies, stopped the worst of the bleeding and attached GPS tags to those who were still breathing, and moved on to the next one.

Leaving the harbor block did not wake them from the nightmare.

They smelled smoke, gunpowder, and death.

The ominous odor of the city before them could not be washed away by the blowing rain.

(This is awful...)

It would be easy enough to hate the enemy for this, but it was Robinson's group that had allowed this to happen. The fact that they had just been following orders did not soothe his conscious. Bringing that ship to C Dock and stationing themselves at Olympia Dome in the first place were both the Faith Organization's decisions.

"Sigma 3 to OD Control. Send the plan to me too. I want to join the battle, but what kind of operation are we running!? OD Control!!"

"...Oh, Zeus, god of life and punishment. Your pure shrine maiden beseeches thee. Lend us the power that once guarded Olympus to send lightning upon the villains who would lay waste to your modern temple..."

"Dammit!!"

That female operator usually kept a head as cool as ice, but she had driven her mind to an elevated state with that flat and expressionless prayer. Robinson and the others in charge of the actual combat were professional soldier, but the people monitoring communications and making decisions based on a variety of regulations were civilians who were only meant to inspect and maintain the sports facilities. They could not necessarily endure the pressure of knowing their decisions could lead to so many deaths.

(The damage is spreading throughout the entire city. I doubt just the intruders could cause all this. Did the ground troops cut their limiters and begin a war of attrition?)

Robinson's group had not rushed to the Olympia Dome in response to the Manhattan issue. There had not been enough time for that.

It was more accurate to say they had happened to be in the right place at the right time while making their near-standard naval resupply stop.

(If we had predicted things that well, we could have handled this better! Curse the Manhattan. It just shows up and then starts scattering disaster everywhere. Who are we even fighting against here!? Are they trying to protect that thing or destroy it!?)

This had all been a stroke of good luck in the first place. It was entirely coincidental that they had acquired the closest base to Manhattan without having to risk their lives for it. And yet they had been told that revealing the purpose and value of Manhattan was a mission that had to succeed even if it cost them their lives. Their lives were being thrown away for the whims of their higher ups who had been blinded by greed. That was Robinson's blunt assessment.

They were up against a faceless enemy.

That was a threat on the same level as some strange form of the occult.

(And when we were already transporting something so dangerous... What even happened to our original mission, dammit!?)

“What should we do, Sigma 3?” asked the large female soldier next to him while she stared off into the distance. “Should we cut the circuits in our minds too?”

“...No,” spat out Robinson. “If this were the ending god had given us, then so be it, but both sides here are no more than human. I’m not about to die for human greed. We’ll regroup with the main unit. I don’t care about that digital war nonsense. We have an overwhelming advantage in numbers, so as long as we keep our cool, we should be able to win this.”

Part 9

Even when they knew it was the best course of action, abandoning cover and running out into an open area was not good for their hearts. Do not break any branches, do not step in the mud, do not cast a long shadow, do not press up against doors or walls, do not shine your light on mirrors or windows - there was a lot of “etiquette” to something as simple as walking, but actual war did not always allow you to follow the textbook for all of those little things.

The situation was awful.

“Run, Myonri! No one can complain if they’re shot in the back now!!”

“But Jonathan was-...”

“Just run!!”

Trying to rescue someone in this open space would only get them shot too. And this soldier had been shot on his center line such that it probably shattered his spine, so there was nothing they could do. They could only clench their teeth and shake free of their regret.

They ran across the runway-like six-lane road and entered the subway station building on the opposite side. Only after diving behind the closest wall did Heivia take in a large gulp of air.

“Pant, pant! Goddamn them. Did they at least shoot Wraith!?”

“You will be sad to hear I am alive and kicking.”

“Oh, hell. Well that proves that it’s the good people who die first...”

Near the entrance, there was a vending machine from a major online store that was forcing its way into the market, so Heivia blew away its earthquake-resistant bolts with his rifle and knocked it over

as a barricade as he seriously spat out those words.

But now it was time for the rioting Faith Organization soldiers to suffer. If they simply pursued, they would have to cross the same road that had exposed Heivia's group to such danger.

"If they really have cut their mental limiters, they'll push their way through even if we fire 5.56mm rounds at a rate of 700 a minute. Modern warfare is all about smart tactics, but there's nothing we can do if a large army is willing to step on their comrades' corpses and cross a river of blood. I'm sure you know why the directional landmines that scatter small metal balls in a fan shape were developed."

"Yes, I am aware," said Wraith. "Keep an eye on the subway tunnels and emergency exits. The drones are not enough to fully grasp the distribution of these aggressively generic enemy soldiers."

"Th-this is an artificial island floating in the ocean, isn't it...?" asked Myonri.

"And? Just like with a ship, the lower the center of gravity the better. In marine construction, child-bearing hips and a large ass are more highly valued than giant tits, so they would have wanted the island to be a little thicker for the added weight."

Wraith snapped her fingers and the young man next to her provided the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers with a few items the size of baseballs. They were more of the serverless remote grenades.

"Use them more as 'eyes' than explosives since a frag grenade can't pierce that shield of flesh. They can also be used to flood the underground area in case that large army tries to push in from below."

"That kind of trick isn't my area of expertise. Hey, someone put together a unit of combat engineers. You help too, Quen..."

Heivia stopped mid-sentence and clicked his tongue.

He scratched his head in an awkward silence.

"...Never mind. Myonri, you're skilled with your hands, right? Would you rather stand out front in the path of that hail of bullets, or move to the back and set things up there? Select 10 people you can use and seal off all the entrances. Hurry! This enemy isn't kind enough to wait until the transformation scene is over!!"

A muffled explosion rang out outside and the shockwave shattered a few of the windows bordering the main road.

Jonathan had been unable to get up as the Faith Organization soldiers had approached to secure

their prisoner, so he had mustered his last ounce of strength to pull the pin on a grenade.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“Damn, it’s already started!!”

“Prepared or not, we have to respond.”

Heivia hid behind the collapsed vending machine and Wraith hid behind a bookstore cart that carried a stack of unsold magazines taller than she was. Both of them aimed their weapons outside.

The explosion seemed to have pushed their excitement over a line. With the roar of a battle scene in a knight movie, Faith Organization soldiers flooded the large street that panoramically filled their vision.

There were people, people, people, and more people.

The thick wall pushed in with such force that it was easy to forget that each gunshot fired toward it was taking a human life. Dark red blood and flesh flew, the soldiers on the front line collapsed, and countless boots trampled their allies’ bodies before they had even stopped breathing.

This was different again from the nightmarish mission led by Piranirie Martini Smoky. Instead of being threatened into it, these people were charging in of their own free will.

“This is just the worst!!!!!!” said Heivia.

“It really is a vision of hell,” agreed Wraith. “I feel silly reminding you of something so basic, but coordinate your magazine changes so the barrage never stops. If the density of bullets thins out, they’ll push in all at once.”

She hatefully spat out the words, but her movements were accurate as could be.

And while calmly firing on the soldiers running out into the road like a sensor-controlled machine, Wraith said something without looking over at Heivia.

“...I’m sorry.”

“Is that supposed to be foreshadowing an emotional sacrificial charge or something? If not, then shut your mouth, crazy girl, because your words are meaningless to me. Your sentimentality is as ridiculous as blood-type fortunetelling, so don’t think it takes away my right to hold a grudge!!”

Static reached Heivia's ears.

Then a voice came over the radio.

"They've put together a unit aside from the one crossing the road. They're circling around to reach the station from the west entrance while you're focused on the main group!"

"Are you kidding me...!?"

"It's hardly surprising when they have so many people to work with," said Wraith. "And lowering the metal shutters isn't going to stop them at this point. Yes, don't randomly spread out your forces. No matter what kind of clichéd new truths come to light, the station will still be filled with blood if they break through the front."

"Then what are we supposed to do!? They're coming from behind. Are we supposed to just sit here and keep fighting until they shoot us in the ass!?"

"Were you not listening? I said not to randomly spread out your forces."

Wraith emphasized the one word while waving a 5-inch monitor in the hand not holding her gun. It was her beloved smartphone.

"Those snake robots can find filming spots without the map data of a server, so I've been observing the battlefield from 32 directions to accurately analyze the enemy's small idiosyncrasies using the high-speed cameras. That's 10,000 frames a second. And thanks to their battle of attrition using such great numbers, I've gathered an incredible amount of data in a very short time. Charge, retreat, diversion, coordination - the big data is boiling in the magic pot. And it's about time to take a look at the whole."

"...Is that really going to make a dramatic difference?"

"This is the Information Alliance style and it works for any kind of group sports. That said, the data is useless without enough people to work with. A single director can't do everything on her own even with the optimal answer in hand. So will you obey me and live, or defy me and die? The choice is yours, my dear sworn enemy."

Heivia hatefully clicked his tongue and forced out some words while creating a pile of corpses from the Faith Organization troops outside.

"...You can do as many good deeds as you want now. It won't change a thing."

"That's fine. I never said I didn't want to die. I just said I don't want to die here."

They had a plan.

The black-uniformed girl took the overall command role.

“Frank, fire more of those grenades into the air. Five should do it for now. Send them between the troops in the road and those preparing to enter the road to crush and separate them with the blasts.”

“Understood.”

“Once those in the road can neither advance nor withdraw, mow them down with your assault rifles. It’s the same as keeping water pipes clean: the charge can continue because of the constant ‘flow’, but once it stops, the fear of death will come rushing back. The slightest stop is all we need.”

“Are you serious?” complained Heivia. “I thought psychology was as much a superstition as tarot readings.”

“Since you have yet to evolve beyond an ape, I will respectfully answer you. It is human nature to be distracted by detours when the way ahead is blocked. Their secondary candidate is the western entrance. Once the pressure here has been reduced, send out three groups with shoulder-fired missiles. Their secondary unit is a minority, so if we blow up their front line right away, we can stop their momentum.”

The difference in overall numbers was 50 against 500 or even more.

When outnumbered by more than four to one, they should have been overwhelmed regardless of each individual’s strength.

However.

To put it another way...

“We don’t have to look at the overall numbers. We only need to recalculate the localized human density,” proclaimed Wraith while looking down at the smartphone screen inserted into the H-shaped gamepad. “Sports data analysis thoroughly analyzes the idiosyncrasies of the players. Once you have detailed information on how individuals and teams handle offense, you know where to focus your defense. That allows you to reveal everything about the situation. It’s the same in soccer, basketball, baseball, and hockey. This is a simple matter of applying that to war instead.”

Even if the overall difference in Olympia Dome was 50 against 500, that did not necessarily apply to the numbers that clashed at any one time. By judging the timing, using the terrain, and firing bullets and bombs to divide the enemy into groups of ten or fewer, the Legitimacy Kingdom would have the advantage of superior numbers against those individual groups.

Of course, they would never pull that off if they simply fought at random. Shouting that they would overcome the difference in numbers was the same as relying on guts.

This tactic was only possible because they had high-speed cameras thoroughly filming everything from 32 directions, international competition level algorithms analyzing that footage, and soldiers who could follow the enemy arrangement and distribution, move as the information on the screen told them to, and turn that ideal into a reality.

The statistics in the data began to encroach on the real scene before them.

It was stagnation.

This did not just apply to the Faith Organization soldiers' charge across the road. The excited energy between them rapidly cooled, their momentum faltered, and the fear of death and the confusion was clearly spreading among them once more. Even though that general "atmosphere" should have been invisible.

"Stop firing for 5 seconds."

"?"

"We'll give them a moment of relief before throwing them back into deadly danger. It's just like getting in a hot bath before being thrown right back out into the midwinter night. That's the most effective means of shaking them. Resume firing."

Heivia's short burst of fire caused a previously-unseen change.

One young soldier out in the road came to a stop, turned around, and tried to run back to the alley from which he had come.

"That woke him up," coldly said Wraith.

She saw the change, but she did not instruct the soldiers to cease firing.

"All that about their mental limiters was a temporary thing. No matter your beliefs or convictions, forgetting the instinctual fear of death is not a natural state for a living creature. So we just have to control that on/off switch. Once this unwanted look at reality has taken away their purity, they cannot rebuild the resolve to trample their allies' corpses and cross that river of blood."

"Thanks for the lecture, but what do we do now!?"

“The minority pushes back against the majority. Instead of that young soldier himself, shoot a few nearby soldiers in the head. Seeing familiar faces destroyed and feeling their blood splattering on him will be more effective. Once the fear of death makes him panic and he starts to scream, the rest will come quickly.”

It was like throwing oil on a fire.

Their coordination clearly crumbled. There were cracks running through that army which had been like a solid wall before. Heivia’s group only had to use sporadic fire to widen those rifts. The enemy was shoving each other to avoid being on the front line and some fistfights were even breaking out.

“They’re just a chaotic crowd now,” cruelly said Wraith. “Finish them off.”

“You’re really scaring me.”

They did not even need to shoot all the remaining soldiers. Simply aiming their assault rifles in that direction produced short shrieks as the soldiers ignored their orders and fled.

“Should we go after them? It’d be a pain if they regrouped and regained their cool.”

“It’s quite the opposite. The calmer people are, the more they remember the fear of death. Give them time, and the fear of death will ensnare their mind like a nightmare. In fact, if we try to deal with them individually, we will lose. Have you forgotten how outnumbered we are? Plus, we only have so much ammo. Data analysis is not all powerful and its effects only show themselves in a limited arena.”

Their goal had always been to blow up the broadcast station that supported the Olympia Dome’s largescale broadcast infrastructure (which could be seen as an EM spying facility that indiscriminately gathered signals from the surrounding area). Using up all their ammunition before arriving there would be meaningless.

Wraith made a casual decision like she was staring at a schedule book.

“We were lucky to rout them like this at all. They didn’t see through our trick. It will take some time for them to prepare for combat once more after abandoning victory of their own volition. Let’s achieve our objective and leave the Olympia Dome before that happens.”

After gathering their dead comrades’ dog tags, Heivia’s group left the subway station and resumed the journey to the broadcast station. Since it was a large facility, the giant boxy building was visible from a distance. They were of course cautious in their approach, but the sense of having cleared the largest hurdle enveloped the Legitimacy Kingdom survivors like a cradle.

However...

“What...is this?”

“?”

Heivia gave Wraith a puzzled look when she uttered a low comment toward her smartphone screen. What was that small LCD screen connected to and what was it displaying?

“There’s...there’s no way they overlooked this!! Did Taratua just decide not to tell us!?”

She seemed to be cursing someone.

And at the same moment, a 50m mass passed by in the sky over their heads.

Their eyes could see it, but their brains refused to accept it.

For one thing, its position made no sense.

It was above all the high-rise buildings in the city. A mass of steel mixed with a heat-resistant reactive substance was positioned at an altitude of more than 200 meters. It was floating. It was flying. If the spherical main body was viewed as the earth, then the 3 Y-shaped wings were attached at the equator. Were those coaxial rotors? The two sets of wings rotated in opposite directions, one clockwise and the other counterclockwise, to free the 200,000-ton mass from the bonds of gravity like a helicopter. There was something like an undercarriage, but could that even be used to move it? The equilateral triangle below it was like a helicopter’s skids or an upside-down version of the tripod used to support the bottom of a pot or frying pan on a gas burner. It may have only been meant to let it take off and land.

“An...”

This was no time to just stare in shock.

It had moved into position above Heivia’s group. Which meant...?

“An Object!?”

A moment later, the colossal weapon that had ended the nuclear age began its attack.

Part 10

Why had that information been kept from them?

Far away on a relatively-intact cruiser, Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks answered her aide's question with a smile.

"Because I have no real reason to be their friends□"

Part 11

All sound had vanished.

Heivia had no idea what had happened.

"Bwahh, ahhhhh!!!??? Abfweah!!"

Something had fallen from directly above and crushed the subway station building like a cardboard box. Then, like drawing a thick line along the ground, the reinforced concrete building and asphalt road were destroyed and a cascade of destruction pressed in on the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes.

It was like a child crushing a line of ants below their shoe.

Heivia just barely escaped the threat.

Something cut by horizontally in front of him and familiar faces were transformed into red and black stains.

"Get indoors!!"

The extreme situation had left Heivia in a daze, but Wraith's shout acted like a slap to the face.

"They're placing the metal balls used for grenades and mines inside the ridiculously powerful artificial air current used to keep that 200,000-ton mass afloat and firing them down from that height. If you don't want to be torn apart by that deadly waterfall, then run!!"

Heivia still could not react, so Myonri grabbed his limp hand.

"Let's go! We can't just die here!!"

"..."

Something else happened before he could say anything.

A different shockwave hit Heivia and the others from above. Their legs could not support them and they were sent rolling across the asphalt. They looked up from the ground just in time to see all of the high-rise buildings' windows shatter and a downpour of glittering glass enter the sky.

“Dammit!!”

This time, Heivia picked up Myonri and crawled below a nearby truck. An ear-splitting cacophony followed. The glass downpour was crashing into the ground.

“What happened to Wraith? Did she actually die this time?”

“She’s waving from behind cover over there. More importantly, what was that just now?”

If the Object was simply launching a cruel attack on the ground, it only had to use that same combination of wind and metal balls. The glass was merely a side effect of something. This only made sense if it had done something else.

A low rumbling and shaking finally reached them.

They were confused at first, but it slowly dawned on them.

“It was firing something...no, it was a shockwave. That was all it took to shatter all the glass here...”

“But there wasn’t anything like a main cannon,” said Myonri.

“Damn, we have no idea how it works without Quenser here. And we can’t come up with a weird name for it without our busty commander. Yeah, that settles it. I’m definitely groping those tits later on since she ran off and left us!!”

“I get that your lust won out over your friendship there, but could you at least put me down before saying things like that?”

Since the enemy could crush a tall, reinforced-concrete building like it was a cardboard box, staying in one spot would be a bad idea, so Heivia and Myonri crawled out from below the truck.

“Hey,” said Wraith when they regrouped. “How were you planning to escape?”

“What?”

“That came from the harbor block. In a reliable but boring move, I imagine that thing fired its main cannon on the Frigate 042 in C Dock. Those of us here in Olympia Dome will be next. If you had

personal watercraft or submersibles loaded on that ship, we need to find a new method.”

“I-its main cannon!? But there was no sign of that...”

“It used the coaxial rotors that support it. It probably has giant, heavy-metal shells loaded inside it like a handgun magazine. Those things have a rotation speed high enough to support 200,000 tons. It only has to open the end of the magazine and release the shell within. Just imagine the destructive power of using centrifugal force to throw a shell like a meteor.”

A storm of small metal balls launched downward by the wind and giant heavy-metal shells launched into the distance using centrifugal force. That left the Faith Organization’s flying Object with no blind spots. There was nowhere they could hide that it could not fire on them.

“Are you kidding? This really is a nightmare...”

“Is it? This seems better than if they had attached a laser cannon to the end of the main rotor and sliced us to pieces with that rotating blade. Would you prefer to be chased by an infinitely-expanding circular saw?”

Wraith nonchalantly upgraded the nightmare while protected by the aide young man. The history giving form to her imagination had to be insane.

“Centrifugal force, shell throwing...no, it might be better to think of it like the hammer throw. Yes, for now, let’s use the enemy codename of Hammer Throw 001.”

“We have to call it that too? We just keep getting more and more influenced by the shitty Information Alliance method.”

“Yes, it is hard to say we are a perfect world power. The one who holds the most information is the winner, but so many idiots misunderstand that concept to the point that they think the sign of the privileged class is cutting off all information to the point that you can buy a private beach in Miami and swim in the nude. All the bored young wives with ringlet-curls are turning into nudists who claim to aspire to a natural lifestyle.”

“Are you just clueless, or are you trying to win me over!?”

“Please, can someone take this seriously!? Our lives are on the line here!!”

Myonri pleaded with them, but she had not taken into account the possibility that the idiots were trying to avoid facing the intense fear before them.

And the Hammer Throw 001 no longer had a distant target to prioritize.

It would be their turn soon.

Myonri's shout had dragged Heivia back to reality, so he felt sweat on his brow.

"...What do we do?"

What would that boy who was not here have done at a time like this?

What would Quenser Barbotage have done?

"What the hell are we supposed to do!?"

A moment later...

It fell.

The flying Object that had been looking down on them dropped far too easily.

".....
.....Ah?"

Heivia's thoughts could not keep up with the crazy sight before him.

But it was no illusion.

After a brief delay, an incredible storm of destruction was thrown out in all directions. More than just the glass, entire groups of buildings were knocked over this time. And it was more than just a shockwave. The connections between the dice-like floating objects made of aluminum and stainless steel were smashed and shaken.

"Ohhhhhwah!?"

Shouting was not going to accomplish anything.

The fact that the ground could softly "sink" into the ocean, allowing some of the force to escape, was the only reason they did not end up with anything like an ice age brought on by an asteroid strike.

"The Hammer Throw 001...fell???"

The rising curtain of dust was swept away by the storm. Myonri reported on what she saw in a daze.

“It was...a crane. ...Did the crane on a building rooftop swing around and...catch on the main rotor?”

“It didn’t swing the arm around,” corrected Wraith while seawater swelled up from below.

An old guerilla tactic against helicopters and tiltrotors was to throw a wire or net over them from the top of a building. But...

“The crane rotated vertically. Some kind of explosive blasted it at the base to tangle the thick wire in the rotor. It didn’t matter that the spherical main body can withstand a nuke.”

An explosive.

A flesh-and-blood soldier had attacked one of the Objects which were synonymous with war.

The 50-meter and 20,000-ton spherical main body had lost its balance and fallen at one corner of the city. It seemed to be near the broadcast station. The exact level of damage was unclear while on the ground like this.

“Could it be...?”

However.

That had to be Heivia’s greatest hope.

So the delinquent soldier could not help but say it aloud.

“Quen-...”

“No.”

A voice bluntly cut him off.

It came from Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

She could not look him in the eye as she forced out the words.

“I’m sorry, but that simply isn’t possible.”

Part 12

Sigma 3, Robinson King-Cole, was just as stunned as the incredible shaking reached him.

“What happened...?”

He doubted the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, or a third group disguised as them could have done this.

Nevertheless, the Second Generation Ix Chel being resupplied at the Olympia Dome had indeed been brought down. It had happened so suddenly that he felt like he was analyzing movement in a video game one frame at a time.

“OD Control! What the hell happened!?”

He already half-suspected that he would receive no response.

At the same time, a hopeless chill ran down his spine. What possibilities could he think of? When he laid out the cards, he could not rid himself of this unease. After all, their mission had been to transport something dangerous.

And that “something” had not been the flying Object called Ix Chel. As extraordinary as it was, that colossal weapon had already belonged to Robinson’s maintenance battalion, so it would not be counted as an external “package”.

But in a way, Ix Chel was nothing compared to the true “package”.

Had it really taken advantage of this confusion...?

“Nee hee hee hee.”

He heard a voice.

A lovely but wicked girl’s voice sounded from directly behind Sigma 3. And the next thing he knew, all other voices had vanished. And he heard no noises at all from the comrades he had been fighting alongside for so long.

“Did you not even notice? You didn’t, did you? Well, that doesn’t really matter. Thanks for your work, though. Oh, this is my destination. And it’s also the end of the line for you. You’ve been waging war day in and day out for so long you have to be familiar with the concept of ‘acceptable losses’, right? If you were tasked with looking after me without being informed...well, just remember that concept.”

He did not even have time to turn around.

But the scene he did not want to see was reflected in the show window in front of him.

It was a red and black hell.

And one violent and brutal visual overpowered even the deaths of his allies.

A young girl with long, long blonde twintails wore an Object Elite's blade, bullet, explosion, and environment resistant special suit which revealed even the slightest contour of her slender body.

She was not the grim reaper that brought death and demise according to predetermined rules, like one's natural lifespan.

She was an incarnation of destruction on a much higher dimension who destroyed the world on a whim.

...He should have noticed.

Whether they were the Legitimacy Kingdom or the Information Alliance, the intruders alone could not have caused so much damage. He had assumed the Faith Organization soldiers' rampage was to blame, but that was not it. It was neither the enemy nor his allies. A third party had used the confusion to remove heads and pierce hearts.

"I followed his example and learned how to use bombs to destroy Objects, but...hmm, what does this mean? I don't see any sign of him... Well, I just need to search a little longer."

This was not war.

It was crime, yet it had done greater harm than an official war.

This was the dangerous thing that Robinson King-Cole's maintenance battalion had been transporting.

"Don't worry about the Manhattan and all that annoying stuff. I, Skuld Silent-Third, will take care of it, so you all can rest in peace. By byyye□"

Between the Lines 1

The continuous IV drip has been ended.

Saint Skuld Silent-Third is active once more.

The Saint has a glowing record as the primary Pilot Elite of the Faith Organization's Second Generation Norn, but she is also known by the Faith Organization to be the greatest war criminal. She generally chooses her victims carefully within the bases which are seen as small cities, but that is not always the case.

Former Oceanian Dictatorship: Annihilation of a pro-government village.

Cape of Good Hope District: Burning of a mercenary camp.

Alaska District: The mysterious deaths of a foreign press group.

Malacca District: The sinking of a cargo ship.

And the infamous Madagascar Report. Please reference that report so it need not be repeated here.

Her primary killing method is strangulation using her own hands, but she is extremely fickle and changes a lot from moment to moment. In the Madagascar District, there was evidence she used old-fashioned torture equipment. These are the crimes of an individual, but if they are slow to be discovered or dealt with, she has the skill to destroy a mid-level guerilla base and construct a mountain of corpses on her own. She intentionally includes shifts and swings of analog emotion in her digital mission operations, so her actions are incredibly hard to simulate and existing troop management rules do not apply. Once she has been released into the wild, do not focus too much on any fixed idea and be extremely careful in how she is handled.

It is dangerous to assume you are safe just because you are the one in with a gun.

What she says and her carefree changes of expression cannot be relied on. The Saint is an extremely intelligent war criminal, so she can use various psychological tests and counseling methods to her advantage to win one's trust.

Be extremely cautious of the unique "charisma of death" found in many serial killers. She generally prefers acting alone, but she has something that destroys the morals of those around her. If you begin to think that you alone can communicate with her, you are in an especially dangerous situation. Make sure you have regular meetings with your supervising officer to receive an objective, third-party view of your mental state.

The Saint is a genuine serial killer, so she shows some fixations that normal people find hard to understand.

Currently, she appears obsessed with a specific individual named Quenser Barbotage. For

information on him, view the records from the Madagascar District, specifically concerning the destruction of the Norn.

Most likely, it is simply not possible to fully control Saint Skuld Silent-Third. If you are giving her freedom as part of your operation, you must build in a high level of acceptable losses for enemy, ally, and civilian alike. Also, it is more effective to lure her with bait than to give her orders. Gathering information on the aforementioned Quenser Barbotage and using that name to distract her may be one possible method.

Offered to Venerable Elder Tyrfing Boilermaker.

May a peaceful holy age arrive to this sinful and impure world.

<http://tl.rulate.ru/book/5253/330507>