

Chapter 3: Selector y/n >> All-Out Battle in the Bermuda Triangle

Part 1

In the end, what was Quenser Barbotage to that girl?

They were Information Alliance and Legitimacy Kingdom. They were undeniably enemies. And while the girl was successfully wearing the two hats of Pilot Elite and international idol, Quenser was incomplete even as a puny foot soldier. He was no more than a battlefield student who had cheerfully walked in from a safe country.

Nothing about them fit together and they could not hope to strike a balance. If they found themselves on opposite sides of a war, the girl would probably kill him as just one of the dots on her display, without ever knowing he was there.

That was all it should have been.

But there was something there that could not explain.

Not even the girl knew what that something was. It might have been easy to put to words, but she was hesitant to make it something “ordinary” by defining it with a simple phrase. The movements of her heart seemed simple but held complex meaning. It seemed to reject the very foundation of the Information Alliance that digitally processed everything, slapped a label on it, and adjusted it for easy searching.

So...

So...

So...

Part 2

At that time, Heivia Winchell should have been standing on the flat roof of Columbia University's second gym.

But those standard assumptions suddenly crumbled away.

By the time he felt a heavy impact pass through his entire body, he had already been launched to the side and thrown off of the large roof.

“Oh...?”

He did not understand.

But reality did not wait for the delinquent soldier's understanding to catch up. The situation was underway. No matter how unreasonable it was, the fact remained that he had been thrown from the equivalent of a four-story building.

Manhattan had moved.

It was only a slight stirring, but it produced enough inertial force to break gravity's hold on the people there so they "fell" to the side.

That included Heivia, Myonri, Wraith, the aide young man, Melly, and Serial Killer Skuld.

Every last one of them was helpless.

"Oaaahhhhhhhh!!!???"

Were Heivia's instincts desperately searching for something to grab onto, or was his rational side trying to regain his balance in midair? He had no idea as his limbs flailed meaninglessly. A four story rooftop was the same as a school rooftop. If he fell from there without a plan, he could die on impact.

He heard continuous sounds of something breaking.

"Gah..."

His groan contained the flavor of blood. He had apparently landed in the trees of the thick artificial woods surrounding the gym. It was a complete coincidence. That may have softened the impact, but his tough uniform was torn in places and a dark red color was seeping out.

But he did not have time to lament his misfortune.

He was not sure why, but Oh Ho Ho was boiling over after learning of Quenser's death. Royce's safety could not restrain her now. Heivia did not understand the detailed issues regarding Rush and Juliet, but it seemed Oh Ho Ho could use the Capulet AI Network to take control of Manhattan.

"Hee hee."

He heard laughter.

It was a girl with long blonde twintails who looked like a fairy.

Had her Pilot Elite special suit come in handy, had the luck granted by the grim reaper's love provided something to cushion her, or was an excessive amount of brain chemicals silencing her sense of pain?

Whatever the case, Skuld Silent-Third danced nimbly between the trees. She spread her arms, shook her small butt, and took rhythmic steps.

The greatest serial killer was released into the world once more.

"Nee hee hee. Ah ha ha! Ha ha ha hah hah hah ha ha ha ha hah hah ah ha ah ha ha ha!!"

"God...dammit!!"

Heivia pulled out the branch stabbed into his upper arm, tossed it aside, and fiercely got to his feet.

"Where are you, swim ring girl? What happened to Manhattan? What did Oh Ho Ho do!?"

His shouts received no response.

Had that girl lost all authority, or was she simply unconscious?

But he could not just sit around and wait for an answer. Even now, Skuld was spinning further and further away between the trees. After collecting the handgun he had dropped during the fall, Heivia fired twice while down on one knee, but he could not hit with the tree trunks in the way. She looked like she was just having fun, but it was a calculated move.

"Myonri, if you're still alive, cover me!! If you're dead, I'm leaving you here!!"

"Ugh, isn't the Legitimacy Kingdom supposed to be the land of chivalry...? Y'know, like ladies first...?"

A short girl groaned and answered him. She was safe after apparently landing in a pile of recyclable materials - in other words, bags stuffed full of leaves for making mulch.

He began pursuit, but he just about stepped on something with his boot.

Melly's thin game system was lying there, but an amateur like Heivia had no idea how to even switch screens after picking it up. But when Myonri looked at it, she frowned at the numbers scrolling across the screen.

"Is this saying that Capulet...isn't controlling Manhattan?"

“Huh!?”

“The AI network’s resources are actually being sent to some other task. Um, like if a mischievous cat won’t stop after you scold it, so you distract it by drawing its attention elsewhere. So Oh Ho Ho might be manually operating Manhattan now that it’s free.”

“But the Rush and Manhattan are entirely different machines, right!?”

“I don’t know how it works either!!”

Neither of them were experts, so they would not find the answer by staring at the screen.

For now, they had to deal with the problem before their eyes. They had to chase after Skuld’s lovely back.

“What do we do about the other people?” asked Myonri. “Like Wraith and Melly!?”

“This is no time to worry about Information Alliance soldiers. Skuld is what matters now!! She’s generally heading west, so is there anything there!?”

“Riverside Park. And the ocean beyond that!!”

It was hard to believe she would try to escape a 20,000 meter enemy by stealing a motorboat or small submarine. But aside from those rational thoughts, losing sight of Skuld Silent-Third would be far too dangerous. Manhattan was the center of the Information Alliance, but it was also a safe country that had never seen war. Heivia’s morals were not so broken that he would let them be the target of a serial killer who had even used the clean wars to satisfy her desires.

He heard the rustling of the underbrush parting and a black-uniformed girl stepped out.

“Capulet is an AI. There is a fundamental difference in speed, but I suppose the work done over the network is no different from if a human did it. The Gatling 033 and Manhattan 000 have entirely different structures, but Juliet and Capulet are directly related. If Capulet can do something, then so can an Idol Elite familiar with Juliet.”

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had her self-defense handgun aimed at Skuld’s back.

“No, curse that Idol Elite. She isn’t simply looking at what Capulet is doing and controlling Manhattan 000 in the same way. She checked on Capulet’s tendencies and now she’s controlling the Object through a different line that even the AI network would overlook. You made this happen, you bright and horrific serial killer!!”

“Ha ha.”

Everyone’s eyes were drawn to the beautiful girl who danced like a fairy.

Even with guns aimed at her from multiple directions, she did not put her hands up or cover her head. As if to tell the shortest and optimal route to eat shit, she included pointless and playful actions and danced in quick circular steps as she celebrated her own freedom.

She spread her arms wide, bent her back, pushed her flat chest out, looked up to heaven, and spoke in the loud, carrying voice of an actor in a musical.

“Ha ha! Ah ha ha!! It’s too bad. It really is too bad. So Quenser’s dead, is he? And just when I thought I could show my teacher how I had grown. ...But it’s strange, isn’t it? The Information Alliance that killed him and the Legitimacy Kingdom that let him die are standing side by side and pursuing me for their own benefit. If - you - ask - me, it’s almost like they’re compromising on something.”

“Damn you...!”

She was not trying to provoke Heivia and the others there.

Just as she finished speaking, Manhattan as a whole shook once more. Heivia had to grab onto a nearby streetlight and he heard a low, twisted voice of resentment sounding from all of the speakers linked to the Object.

“I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you...”

“Oh Ho Ho, you idiot!!”

“I will blow you away, destroy you, and slaughter you!!!!!!”

The ground lifted up.

No, Manhattan itself tilted, remaking the entire ground around Heivia’s group into a steep incline. The ocean had to be just a few hundred meters ahead, but that shortest escape route was now an unscalable cliff. Metal trashcans, felled logs, and even small cars rolled toward them like boulders.

She was receiving no help from the AI network as she controlled the giant system entirely manually.

“Kh...!!”

already started figuring out how it works. Instead of recklessly shutting it out, she's distracted it from the tissue box by drawing its attention to the cat toy. That way it withdraws its resources from the Manhattan 000."

The problem was that Oh Ho Ho was not calmly selecting targets to attack. It was someone else who fully controlled this scene.

"Ah ha, ha ha ha. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

They heard the innocent laughter of a child given a new toy by Santa Claus. Skuld danced with her blonde twintails and large decorative ribbon spread out behind her and her back moved into the distance beyond the flames and smoke. Instead of defying the newly-formed steep slope, she gave up on the shortest route to the ocean and returned to densely-populated Manhattan.

"What happened to Oh Ho Ho's power of friendship!?" asked Heivia.

"Weren't you just saying something about the Information Alliance soldiers not mattering?" asked Myonri. "More importantly, that's Harlem over there. If she cuts through there, she can still reach the ocean. And even if she doesn't go that far, there could be heliports everywhere around here."

"That G-cup's dad was in the university, right? What do you think? She's keeping all this straight in her head, isn't she!?"

There was a long and narrow area of land to north as well, but Skuld had not gone that way. So was she searching for the water after all?

Just then, a giant form cast a shadow overhead. Heivia quickly slid down the steep grassy slope to get away before a mass larger than a refrigerator crashed into the ground, crushing the metal pillar he had been clinging to.

It was a clear die with 3 meter sides.

Someone who looked like a beauty pageant winner was contained inside as if time had stopped for them.

"Hey..."

"Is that resin or something?"

Heivia and Myonri was dumbfounded as the burning lawn unnaturally swelled up from below. Was this another of Manhattan's abilities? Something like clear ivy rose like large snakes rearing their heads. They tangled around the nearby buildings, took the mysterious cubes with them, and came to

a complete stop.

Hadn't Melly said the movable parts mimicked a plant's structure? Something about turgor pressure? In that case, the clear ivy may have been trees and the dice containing humans may have been fruits.

Civilians could not take a ride on a normal Object.

So with an Object measuring more than 20,000 meters, not even a professional fighter pilot could bear the inertial forces. Then was the Manhattan a waste of ability? No. This was the answer to the problem presented by combat mobility.

By sealing the people away and putting them in a state of suspended animation, the harmful effects could be prevented. The skyscrapers would not have been able to withstand the horizontal shaking of true combat mobility, so the strange ivy was wrapped around them to provide the support needed to prevent a collapse.

Oh Ho Ho intended to provide this assistance to all ten million people in the city.

There was no denying it now. Based on Myonri and Wraith's opinions, it was a clear possibility that Oh Ho Ho could manually control the entirety of Manhattan with just her ten fingers.

"Are you kidding!?! How self-righteous can she be!?"

The Information Alliance civilians might be safe with the reinforcement and protection, but if the enemy Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were caught in that, they could easily find themselves in a cell or a forced labor camp the next time they opened their eyes. If they were made a specimen of cold sleep at room temperature in those cubes, their life was effectively over. The risk was greater for Heivia and Myonri, so they began running without worrying about Wraith.

The Object could have its rampage without any risk of killing the people.

They had to continue pursuing Skuld while being pursued by the out-of-control Oh Ho Ho. That high-IQ serial killer was developing a method of manipulating Manhattan and Oh Ho Ho who should have been the greatest threats to her.

They heard what sounded like a heavy freight train moving along the road.

"Oh, no! Watch out for the road! There's a combat train loaded with heavy cannons there. This looks different from those Bullmites and the like. Get behind the buildings!!"

"We can't go there either! I see swiveling rocket launchers hidden among the parabolic antennae on

top of the broadcast tower there! There are at least two with 20 linked boxes each!! They don't look like autonomous unmanned weapons, so they're probably linked directly to Manhattan. And the swiveling range overlaps!!"

Was there no safe zone in this city?

Unsure what to do, Heivia and Myonri desperately tried to come up with somewhere for them to go.

"Is Harlem the place I'm thinking it is!?" asked Heivia.

"I've heard you don't want to go there at night or set foot in the back alleys there. In addition to the original local rules, the influx of Hispanic, Asian, Italian, and Russian organizations has made such a mess of the place that first-time tourists can step on a landmine of a taboo at any time."

But even if it was a dangerous area, it was still in a safe country. Skuld had breathed the air of battlefield country slums all around the world, so to her, it might feel like her own backyard.

However, when they circled behind the buildings, they did not find drug dealers and guns much too large for simple self-defense.

The clear ivy was already wrapped around all the buildings to reinforce them and people of all races and occupations were enclosed in cubes.

Heivia clicked his tongue, avoided the main road while on the lookout for a special camera that stuck out through the small holes in manhole covers, and spotted blonde twintails lightly dancing in the distance.

It was Skuld Silent-Third.

"!!"

He gave no warning this time. Heivia aimed his gun at her like a machine, but she must have seen his reflection in a show window or side mirror because she placed her small hands around her mouth like a megaphone and shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Shoot this coldblooded boy!! Doesn't it piss you off to see him doing his job like normal even though Quenser's gone!?"

"Ahhhh!! Uhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!?"

Heivia and Myonri's bodies were once more tugged to the side and yanked from gravity's grasp.

What had been a wall covered in wall art of a jazz player had transformed into the ground by the time their feet reached it.

They did not have time to be surprised by every little thing.

They ran along the wall to pursue Skuld. Heivia fired his handgun a few times along the way, but Manhattan would shake to the left or right each time and he could not aim properly. If he was not careful where he stood, he could easily “fall” into the empty gap of the main road which continued for dozens or even hundreds of meters.

“Ugh, we’ve been standing on the wall for more than a minute now! Is this not a temporary thing!?”

“It depends on how she’s doing it, but if she just spins around in one place, it could last for years. This Object could maintain a 1G environment even if it was launched into space.”

That said, Oh Ho Ho was in a state of extreme confusion. She seemed unable to focus on any one thing, so it was more like they were thrown out into a storm of violent winds blowing in from every direction. An electric car could not support itself and was thrown sideways and a large dumpster fell from the sky. Using a car or motorcycle in this environment would actually be more dangerous. With each intermittent cannon blast, the skyscrapers along the line of fire were mercilessly destroyed and the rubble poured into the road like an avalanche. The very scenery seemed to distort around them, so the course of pursuit they planned to run down would crumble every few seconds and they would have to think up a new one. At this point, they were not really sure whether they were pursuing Skuld or simply trying to survive.

“The next thing they knew” was the best way of putting it.

While Heivia and Myonri ran recklessly through Harlem, they found themselves on the coast. This had likely been the border of the Harlem River to begin with. The fairy-like murderer hopped across the colliding yachts and cruisers still moored there. She finally hopped into a high-speed motorboat that probably cost as much as a house.

“Skuld Silent-Third!!”

“Whoops.”

It was a casual thing.

The twintailed demon broke the keyhole with her heel, turned back their way, gave up on hotwiring it, and snapped her fingers.

“After coming all the way to the middle of the Information Alliance, I was hoping to get the powerful engine of a Rosen Kavalier...but oh well. Still, it’s true I also kind of wanted to get a taste of my own

death.”

“Let’s end this. The world has enough problems without you. So I’ll end it here. I’ll return you to your grave where a ghost like you belongs!!”

“You can try, but doom is already on its way.”

Skuld placed a hand on her a hip that looked as fragile as glass and pointed her other hand straight up.

A moment later, the Manhattan’s cannon blast arrived.

The entire scene was blown away.

It affected the docks, all the yachts and cruisers moored there, and even the uncountable number of skyscrapers knocked down along the line of fire.

Heivia himself was freed from gravity’s hold.

He may have flown up dozens...no, more than a hundred meters.

The next thing he knew, the ocean’s surface filled his vision.

It felt like landing on solid concrete. It did not matter what he thought or did just before hitting. The shock of impact swiftly took away Heivia Winchell’s consciousness.

Part 3

When Heivia Winchell awoke next, he initially could not piece his memories together in order.

What had happened to Skuld, Oh Ho Ho, Myonri, Lendy, and, well, everything?

But the first thing that moved into view was a different face.

He was lying inside a room that felt like a steel box and the Legitimacy Kingdom officer who had abandoned him was looking down at him.

It was Frolaytia Capistrano.

“!!”

(I'll kill that traitor for abandoning us!!)

The chain of command and hierarchical society meant nothing. Heivia practically sprang up, moved his arms out on reflex, and tried to grab her collar and constrict her carotid artery, but she grabbed his wrists and mercilessly threw him to the floor located a level below the medical bed.

"Ugh, uwehh... Dammit, I see our busty commander is as sadistic as ever. That rules out this being a convenient dream..."

"So you're awake. That's what I wanted to know. Now, get back out there. We are seriously lacking in personnel."

"...Wait, what happened now? You don't even need to question me?"

"Time was not frozen while you were asleep. Myonri has already filled us in on most everything and the Information Alliance group has corroborated it. That group being Melly Martini Extradry, Lendy Farolito, and Wraith Martini Vermouthspray."

Hearing the name of the girl who had shot Quenser felt like having a nail slowly driven into his heart. But if he let that get the better of him, he would be no better than Oh Ho Ho and her rampage in the Manhattan.

Frolaytia had referenced the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance, but that did not cover everything.

"...Then is the Faith Organization's Skuld Silent-Third still at large?"

"That is certainly a problem, but let's start with what we can handle now. That means the Manhattan."

The busty silver-haired commander gestured back with her index finger. She was apparently telling him to go with her. That suggested he really was being sent back into the war. He could not expect any special treatment for being injured. He had essentially taken a step into the afterlife, but as Frolaytia guided him to the medical room's exit, she looked back and spoke to him.

"There is a lot I would like to say...but for now, good job returning alive. For that you have my praise."

"...A lot more of us didn't make it."

"Yes. It's a shame what happened to Quenser."

Once they stepped out into the corridor, it became clear they were on some kind of warship. He found it unlikely, but had they approached the Manhattan to collect him and the others as they floated in the ocean? That did not seem realistic. It would have honestly been suicide.

“It was fortunate that coincided with our fourth recon mission. The battle line had moved somewhat because the Princess was engaged in a quick battle with the Manhattan, so we collected you once that area of ocean was free. Then again, one side of the Baby Magnum was fried as a result.”

“...”

“To be honest, we have to conclude defeating that thing with an external attack is not possible. Even if it was risky, we wanted to collect some people who had internal information.”

...She must have used that excuse to forcibly convince the higher ups.

Heivia’s group had not simply been abandoned and written off in the paperwork. They had been collected alive. The Manhattan had to be moved away to do so. Just how much of a tightrope walk had the Baby Magnum risked to push that monster back a mere meter? And how many times had she had to do so back to back? The Princess had fought on the front line with no hope of victory and Frolaytia had fought against the high-ranking officers back in the safe countries, so they had to have worn down their souls.

They had given it their all.

But if they had only been a little faster...

“The crux of the issue has shifted from the Martini Series to the Information Alliance Idol Elite. Is that correct?”

“Yes...”

Once they arrived at the ship’s briefing room, many eyes gathered on Heivia. In addition to the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers, he saw Lendy, Melly, Wraith, the aide young man, and some other Information Alliance people in one corner. Their respective standpoints had changed. It was now their turn to be on a bed of nails, but given how they had treated him, Heivia was not about to show them any kindness. They needed to be thankful they had been collected at all.

Heivia then realized that he stood out as much as the Information Alliance group.

It was true most everyone here was Legitimacy Kingdom, but they were primarily new faces who had been gathered together here. The losses had just been too great, so Heivia and Myonri stood out even though they had been with the group from the beginning.

“Hi, Lilim Gazette, Age 17. So you managed to survive too, huh?”

“...I’ve realized something. The trick to a happy life is to blend into the group and not stand out. I can’t believe you people who push your way to the front at times like that...”

The dark-eyed girl was apparently carrying another trauma with her. She was curled up on a folding chair with her arms around her raised knees.

Frolaytia left Heivia, stepped up onto the podium, and operated the projector as she opened her mouth.

“We were already aware the Manhattan was a problem, but the situation has changed. This here is Melly Martini Extradry. She is the Martini Series tasked with defending New York and, hard as it is to believe, she is also the Object’s original Pilot Elite. As you can tell from the fact that she is here and Manhattan continues to move, it has left her control.”

When everyone’s gazes fell on her, the girl in a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper began to tremble for some reason. Unlike the previous potatoes, these were all new faces, so her tension value may have been reinitialized.

“Gh!?”

Melly seemed somehow excited and then her spine jerked backwards like a jolt of electricity was running down it.

“Ah, ghh... When I’m not linked with the Manhattan 000, this is really hard on my spine.”

She seemed to be putting up with something.

Also, her voice was no longer supported by the ring’s speakers. The ring was apparently a wireless accessory for the Manhattan 000 rather than a device linked directly to Capulet. It could function on its own in safe mode, but that only allowed the ring itself to move around slowly.

She took a deep breath to suppress something and then switched over to her serious mode. She folded up her arms and legs like a fetus on the giant ring and she held the thin game system to her chest.

“This probably goes without saying, but none of this would be a problem if I was capable of regaining control of Manhattan. That Idol Elite has completely taken it from me. 831. Sorry about that.”

An image of Manhattan was displayed on the wall, but it was very different from the streets Heivia

and Myonri had run through. The electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon in Central Park had already been there, so this went well beyond that. Large cannons jutted out on either side like giant wings and cannons the size of normal Object main cannons were artlessly lined up throughout the streets. Radars and camera lenses had also grown all over.

It now looked more like a weapon than a city.

“Those of us in the Martini Series pitted our opinions against Capulet’s to eliminate the errors and lead it to the optimal action,” said Wraith. “So keeping our losses to a minimum was seen as the best course of action. If we lacked our full numbers, we could not draw out 100% of our specs. ...But that innocent yet dangerous Idol Elite is different. She does not even need to converse with Capulet. She’s doing it all manually. And she’s easily producing more than 100% of the expected performance. Think of children working away with cooking implements in a cooking class only for the kind mother to gently confiscate the knife from her child’s hand.”

“A manual interface. ...AI is generally meant to support people’s tasks. So even if there is a fundamental difference in speed, a human should be able to perform any task an AI can. 299. Even if the Gatling 033 and the Manhattan 000 are different machines, if Capulet can do it, then so can the Idol Elite who looked after the directly-related Juliet. No, she might even be able to find a superior line. But even so, it’s hard to believe she can control such a massive system with keyboards...”

“If she did simply try to pit her opinions against Capulet’s, they would only trip each other up and she could not gain the initiative. Just like a cat that keeps getting into trouble no matter how many times you scold it. The Idol Elite was smart about that. AI is meant to support human work. So by controlling the Manhattan 000 all on her own, she isn’t leaving any room for Capulet and she is also displaying more interesting tasks so it will redirect its resources on its own.”

“She kindly confiscates it like a teacher and she tempts it away like a demon. 992.”

“Of course, this is all based on the extraordinary assumption that she can do a faster job without Capulet. What a pain. I’ve heard of AI making humans lazy, but I’d never heard of the opposite until now...”

“Anyway.” Frolaytia ended that line of discussion to reclaim control of the conversation. “Currently, the Manhattan is being controlled by the Elite in charge of the Information Alliance Second Generation Rush. The relationship between Object and Elite is supposed to be one-to-one, meaning an Elite cannot control a different Object, but the software for these two apparently had related development histories. They’re like a parent and a child. And those similarities in the design phase apparently mean Manhattan can be controlled with the Juliet and Capulet’s shared control system.”

“So which one is Oh Ho Ho really controlling? Capulet or Manhattan?”

“We should look at it as both, Mr. Foot Soldier who is only earnest when it comes to clinging stubbornly to life. She is redirecting Capulet’s attention and then controlling Manhattan 000 as a weapon. Like someone avoiding the cat playing in their room while also working on some paperwork

on the computer.”

Heivia scrunched up his entire face in response to Wraith’s words. He could not even imagine doing anything on that scale.

“So if cute little Capulet can do something, then the young G-cup wife can do an even better job? You can say that if you want, but is this really limited to just Manhattan anymore? We aren’t going to have other metropolises transforming into humanoid robots and attacking us, are we?”

Frolaytia responded to Heivia’s question by glancing over at the Information Alliance group. Wraith sighed quietly.

“This is only my intuition talking, but I think we can view of this problem as exclusive to the Manhattan 000.”

“Wait, so you have no proof?”

Frolaytia’s voice lowered in tone, but Wraith was unfazed.

“That Idol Elite is using some other interesting material to redirect Capulet’s focus, but she’s mostly treating it like a nuisance. She’s holding Capulet’s reins so she can focus on controlling the Manhattan 000. That suggests she won’t use the AI network to spread her rampage to the other side of the globe. The gears aren’t set up that way.”

“Also, there aren’t many AI-controlled Objects. The Information Alliance is on the cutting edge there, but even we primarily use human hands to control Objects. It should be fine. It’s all good.”

Melly’s words may have been accurate, but they did not seem to carry much weight. The black-uniformed girl must have been annoyed that even she had to risk her life based on speculation because she shrugged as she continued.

“As the Gatling 033’s Pilot Elite, she’s familiar with looking after Juliet which is directly related to Capulet. ...The system structure might be easier to picture if you focus on the obvious hardware of that one weapon instead of on the vague idea of the whole AI network.”

The busty silver-haired commander winked at Wraith’s words.

“Meaning?”

“Don’t worry about anything else. Focus only on the Manhattan 000 problem.”

Some images of the G-cup Idol Elite were added above the footage of Manhattan as a weapon. The boxes for personal information were blank because not even the Legitimacy Kingdom's intelligence department had been able to track that down. That showed just how much the Information Alliance treasured her. And that treatment would of course be the result of her extremely high level of skill.

"Her objective is unknown." Frolaytia used a baton to point at an image of the sexy idol's face. "But for some inexplicable reason, it was the death of Quenser Barbotage, a battlefield student from our maintenance battalion, that triggered this rampage. We can only speculate how that was processed in an enemy nation, but the problem is that the Idol Elite has left the military's chain of command and holds the power to destroy the world."

The Manhattan's attack range (based on the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon) was displayed around its location on the map in the ocean off of Central America. That covered the Information Alliance home country in eastern North America, the Capitalist Corporations home country to the west of that, and even some important Legitimacy Kingdom ports down in South America. Wherever it attacked, it was bound to drag the world into a long, drawn-out war that surpassed the usual clean wars.

"But the fact remains that we don't know what it is she wants to do. Does she simply want revenge against the person who killed Quenser, is she aiming more broadly for the higher ups of the four world powers, or is she clinging to the desperate hope that she can resurrect Quenser Barbotage as a clone, robot, or AI program? Whether or not those would be possible, she can cause a lot of destruction in the attempt."

"Have you predicted...how far she will go?" asked Myonri.

"What good is worrying about the worst case scenario when we have so little information? Would it help to speculate about an explosion large enough to hit us even if we fled the solar system?"

Hearing that girl being spoken about like a complete madwoman must have pushed her patience to the limit. Lendy Farolito, a silver-haired and brown-skinned commander with a different look to Frolaytia, silently raised her hand.

Once she had permission to speak, the Information Alliance commander opened her mouth.

"I will admit that the current situation is extremely dangerous. If that girl has a manual interface, she might very well be capable of distracting Capulet while manually controlling the Manhattan 000."

Forcibly avoiding the points against her would have only earned suspicion.

To draw the enemy in and lead them in an advantageous direction, Lendy decided she needed to be careful what information she used here.

“But at the same time, she is the Gatling 033’s Elite and this is her first time using the Manhattan 000’s system. So she is not used to it. It might be similar, but the control system is not identical and she must make up for the discrepancies between the two Objects before she can control this one. She must focus on Capulet’s Juliet-related Object controls while also actually operating the manual controls, so it will be little different from climbing into a brand-new Object. You could say she is taking it for a test drive or breaking it in right now.”

That produced a groan not from Heivia but from the Object maintenance soldiers. They knew how much damage the Princess’s Baby Magnum had taken. That battle had been a series of miracles with her life at risk each and every instant, but for their opponent, it had been no more than a side job to learn the ropes.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“So once she’s done breaking it in, the world will truly be exposed to Manhattan’s fury?”

“That could be in a few days or a few minutes for all I know. But she is not a dangerous element that is plotting to overthrow the world and she is not a cultist who believes in some apocalyptic theory. That I can promise you.” Even after all this, Lendy still intended to defend the Idol Elite. “I assume her actions here are impulsive in nature, so she likely has no concrete objective in mind. If anything, I think we should view this as the result of provocation by Skuld Silent-Third, that serial killer released by the Faith Organization.”

“And?”

Frolaytia remained coolheaded. She would use whatever she could, but she would throw out whatever she could not. So she would not necessarily flatly reject something she emotionally agreed with.

“As I said, I admit this is extremely dangerous. And with that in mind, we need to keep her desire for revenge above a certain level. Even if that means intentionally propping it up.”

“W-wait, she has her finger on a trigger that could destroy the world at any moment!” protested Heivia. “Didn’t we say she’s on a rampage that could start a war between the four world powers!?”

“That is my point.” Lendy enunciated each word carefully. “Her head is boiling over with an impulsive desire for revenge, but once she calms down, she will realize what it is she has done. And she will realize that the destructive power she has obtained cannot change the cold reality of the situation. Humans are most dangerous in the instant mania is replaced by depression. To prevent her from suddenly and utterly losing control, I believe we must keep her psyche at a certain level.”

Part 4

She was in a daze.

The Information Alliance Idol Elite known as Oh Ho Ho was not inside a cockpit surrounded by strange machinery. She was in Midtown, Manhattan, New York. Specifically, she was in the center of Times Square which was one of the biggest tourist locations.

Time had stopped.

That was likely one of Manhattan's abilities. All the people in the square were closed in 3m clear cubes with their looks of shock frozen on their faces. That they still held their smartphones with the lenses pointed outward may have been their Information Alliance-ness showing through.

The scenery had greatly changed. Giant clear ivy was tangled tightly around the outside of the towering skyscrapers to thoroughly reinforce them so they would not collapse from the movements of the world's largest Object. They were harder than steel beams, more flexible than muscles, and designed to allow any external force to escape safely.

Was this heaven or hell?

Either way, the ringlet curls girl spoke weakly in that strange and unfamiliar world.

"Now I've done it..."

The extremely bitter and heavy feeling she felt may have been similar to the "sage time" whispered of on the internet.

No one responded to her, of course. Oh Ho Ho thought about the situation while touching the cold surface of a giant die containing a mother protecting a stroller.

She hated it.

She hated the world beyond all measure.

...But what exactly was she supposed to do now? It was clear as day that nothing she did now would bring Quenser back. For the Oh Ho Ho who performed as the G-cup top idol using the Information Alliance's 3D modeling, perfectly recreating an individual using AI, robots, clones, virtual reality, or other methods seemed plausible enough, but none of those would really be him. She recalled the 4m G-cup idol she had been operating earlier. It simply was not the same. She wanted to see Quenser again. That was a grand and emotional task, but asking the adults for the highest quality body pillow made from all sorts of cutting-edge technology was not what she wanted.

In fact...

(Th-the adults must be working hard to figure out why I went nuts... O-ohhh, it's so embarrassing!! Are they giving out all my information!? Are they posting blown-up pictures of me on the briefing

room screen!?)

In addition to her personal feelings as a teenage girl, this was also dangerous for her side job as an idol.

Her entire face grew bright red, but she could not turn back time. She hoped the Information Alliance would do its things and seal away all that information as national secrets.

“...Sigh.”

Staying here would accomplish nothing. But going elsewhere would not change anything either.

Her small stomach growled inside the silence of a city devoid of human voices. She wondered if feeling hungry like normal was a good sign. She was surprisingly resilient to stress, so she looked around and found she would have a hard time even finding a burger with everyone enclosed in resin. It looked like she would have to wander around in search of a bread vending machine or something. And it would have to be one that accepted the e-money from a smartphone or card. As a top-level Pilot Elite and a top idol, Oh Ho Ho was not the type to walk around with change. Even tips were paid electronically these days.

But then one piece of clear ivy smoothly bent over to her. It was thicker than her arm and the tip opened in front of her face like a beautiful flower made of crystal. Something like sticky nectar dripped out. The Manhattan 000 was supposedly being controlled by Oh Ho Ho via countless keyboards, but when she got distracted, Capulet would move in to fill the gap.

AI was meant to support human work. When she came to a stop, Capulet moved its resources back in.

Oh Ho Ho gave the dripping clear liquid a very troubled look.

“...Are you telling me to eat that?”

Her voiced question received no response.

She had no idea how much it was all linked, but as her doubts grew, the presence of the AI network also grew. It was like a GPS navigation app that mistakenly thought the user was lost and provided predictive route popups and control tip popups when they had only stopped in front of a vending machine to take a break.

Oh Ho Ho hesitantly scooped some up on her special suit's fingertip, moved her mouth in hesitation, and finally squeezed her eyes shut and stuck her finger in her mouth. It was unexpectedly sweet and thick. It reminded her of a diet drink that was meant to fill the stomach. She used one hand to brush her hair off of her cheek like she was using a park water fountain and she stuck her tongue out

toward the clear flower for more of the mystery health food.

“Nn...gulp. Gulp, gulp.”

It did not seem harmful.

As a Pilot Elite, she was used to the stimulation of many different chemicals on her tongue, so she had decent instincts for such things. If it was dangerous, she would have known as soon as it touched the tip of her tongue.

“Pwah. Hmm, I would get tired of this pretty quickly...”

Her comment was answered by more and more ivy approaching in much the same way. The diet drink may have had coffee and yogurt flavors, but she slapped them aside. She did not like how they kept pushing up toward her nose and blocking her vision, like people handing out tissues on the roadside or full screen smartphone ads.

It was time to drive them away.

She generally used a console, but she did have an emergency method. She used a one-handed wireless keyboard that resembled a numeric keypad to send the world's ten toughest unsolved problems toward Capulet and redirect its resources there.

(Phew...)

Once the biological desire for food was met (albeit in an unconventional manner), her thoughts could face the realistic problem. In that utterly silent city, Oh Ho Ho returned to a work van parked on the curb in Times Square. The windowless back space contained a single seat surrounded by keyboards and it was normally used as a mobile console room for remotely controlling the powered suit, but that had changed.

It was now an indirect cockpit for fully controlling the Manhattan 000, the world's largest Object. Melly Martini Extradry and the thousands of other Martinis around the world did not matter. Just by moving her fingers and hitting those countless keys, she could redirect Capulet's attention elsewhere and control the Manhattan 000 herself. That small space had to be far more valuable than a lunar villa.

But Oh Ho Ho ignored the traffic laws and hopped into the driver's seat which had no connection to the Object. Clear ivy was anchoring the van to the ground, so she used the one-handed wireless keyboard to send the bare minimum of commands needed to have that ivy retract, freeing the van. After lowering the seat as far as it would go so her feet reached the pedals, she grabbed the steering wheel. It was an electric van with an automatic transmission, so it did not feel like operating a real vehicle. It felt more like a go-kart at a run-down amusement park.

She could have changed the traffic lights as she pleased, but with no one else around, there was no need to obey the lights in first place. This was another of the Manhattan 000's abilities. She skillfully avoided the abandoned vehicles and the people encased in cubes as she made her way toward Columbia University.

She had no idea how much hardware had been linked together to create Capulet or how much processing power it had, but after contacting it, she had realized it was more like a cat than a dog. Telling it to not scratch the walls would only create a confrontation that wore them both down, so it was more efficient to approve of the action while guiding it in a better direction, such as attaching packing tape to the wall or buying a scratching board. That was a lot like Juliet which she was quite familiar with. But even with that mutual contact with the AI network that occasionally attempted to interfere, she could not escape the stifling sense of loneliness.

(Rationally thinking, I can't force the 10 million people in Manhattan to go along with my selfishness.)

The work van was nothing compared to a 20,000 meter monster. She easily operated the steering wheel to drive the van through silent Manhattan while she lost herself in thought. As she drove down Broadway to approach her goal, she saw the remains of large vehicles and unmanned Bullmites. It was the aftermath of the previous fighting.

Some of them were still functioning, so two or three Bullmites ran alongside the work van.

After arriving at Columbia University accompanied by her unmanned bodyguards, Oh Ho Ho ignored the no parking sign and stopped the van right in front of the university. She got out and approached the second gym and the toppled trees around it. The serverless but coordinated Bullmites followed her.

Finding the person she wanted was not easy.

She had done this herself and should have known the exact location, but it all seemed different when seeing it for herself.

The area was full of clear cubes. It was like cutting open the belly of a giant fish full of eggs. An explosion of her personal emotions had caused all of this. She had trapped them and sealed them away. The number of cubes packing the gym made her feel nauseous, but she eventually found the one she was looking for.

"...Father..."

He was a sickly-looking middle-aged man with a beard.

Even with all this going on...no, because all of this was going on, he had been using his

smartphone's voice recorder to leave a record of what was happening when his time was frozen. He had carelessly not set the screen to shut off after a few minutes. The background photo of the whole family smiling together was visible through the translucent window.

It was not the top-level Pilot Elite or international top idol he had been trying to protect. He had been focused on a completely different side of her.

Quenser Barbotage was no more.

But that did not mean she could throw everything else into the flames.

She placed her palm on the cold cube, squeezed her eyes shut, and thought. She had already made an unforgivable mistake, but what should she do even so?

If she wanted to have her revenge, she could do it.

She could kill the person who actually did it. She could request a list of everyone pulling the strings and profiting from it behind the scenes and reduce every last one of them to ashes. She could even send the responsibility for the wars and military actions back to the world's safe countries which enjoyed peace and tranquility.

But. However.

Was that really what she should do?

"...I need to surrender..."

Finally, Oh Ho Ho forced the words from her small mouth.

"That would be the fastest way to resolve all of the issues surrounding Manhattan. I did all this without thinking, but it is true I separated the possibly-dangerous Martinis from Manhattan. If I return this to the Information Alliance, it should resolve the original problem."

That decision may have been correct.

It may have been the best available choice in the world created by her decisively incorrect choice.

But there was no guarantee everyone else would also make the right decision.

An alarm rang at the same frequency as a baby's crying to most effectively draw people's attention to their eardrums. All of the phones held by the people inside the cubes lit up at once, sending the

emergency information into Oh Ho Ho's field of vision.

It was not that something had been found.

Quite the opposite. More and more screens were going dark. The unmanned drones automatically monitoring the ocean around the Manhattan 000 were being shot down by someone. A great threat was approaching. And the fact that she could not see what it was only made it feel more threatening.

"What is this...?"

Part 5

Shortly before that...

"Uuh...bh..."

Rigas Blackpassion uttered a groan that carried the sticky flavor of blood. The middle-aged man was a Captain in the Capitalist Corporations and the commander of a submarine, but he was now so badly injured it was hard to tell whether he was the mummy man in the center or all the medical equipment surrounding that. It was hard to believe he was still alive. Technically speaking, Frolaytia had killed him over and over only to forcibly resurrect him once more, but for now, he was still alive.

A messenger had arrived for him.

It was a crane fly drone that could freely move in any direction by turning its six wings. The collection of delicate machinery was equipped with a camera and microphone and it produced a sound quieter than a fan as it hovered near the window.

Someone spoke through the machine.

"Hello, Captain. Your attempt to trigger emergency demand using the Manhattan has failed."

"...Levert? Any chance of rescuing me?"

"We have made some attempts through diplomatic routes, but it does not look promising. The Manhattan issue is so large that all of our contacts are putting the requests off until later."

"Then what is this? Even if you supply me with additional equipment, I can no longer move."

"I will admit you are in a worse state than I expected, but that leaves us with only one option."

There was not a hint of disappointment in that machine-like voice. And the young man's voice continued.

"Captain, if you cannot return to your duties, I would like for you to transfer your authority."

"..."

"If you could escape under your own power or had died after intense torture, this would not have been necessary. But unfortunately, you still live and remain in an enemy nation's hands. For the largescale operation we are about to begin, we require the signatures of the operation commanders for all the naval ports on the west coast. Captain, the delay of your authorization is hindering the entire operation. Even if it must be done via camera, I will see this through. Make your decision before it is too late."

There was no hesitation there.

Giant gears were crushing an individual life.

The mummy man gave a snort of laughter.

"I must know. ...What will happen to my family?"

"Our military and the PMC's sponsors promise to support them in every way. It might be suicide, but your action here is also a high-level military action. Thus, it qualifies for the special high payout life insurance policy you signed up for in place of a bereaved family pension."

"That is fine then."

"I have prepared the tool. Just like before, it contains two rounds to ensure you will succeed even if your hand is shaking. I also have the '12 Highland you enjoyed drinking so much. Single malt."

The drone contained an assassination handgun small enough to fit in the palm of his hand and a glass container only a bit larger than a vial of eye drops. Rigas twirled the amber-colored liquid around, removed the cap, and drank it.

"What I am about to say does not need to be recorded. Think of it as the ramblings of a drunk."

"Very well."

"You are a good soldier. Do not let yourself turn out like me, Levert."

“Unfortunately, I cannot promise you that. You are already my role model, Captain.”

A slight smile appeared on the mummy man’s lips.

And a dry sound rang out.

The drone swiftly left from the window before the shocked military doctors could open the curtain partition around the bed. There was no need to speak through the speaker since there was no one to hear it, but whoever-it-was did so anyway.

“A decisive judgment with no hesitation whatsoever. A truly wonderful end.”

Another dark flame.

The world seemed to solidify and create only the worst of things.

“The transfer of authority is confirmed. We now have authorization from the commanders of every west coast naval base. Notify every Object already waiting in the Bermuda region of ocean. It is time for an all-out attack on the Manhattan.”

Part 6

The Legitimacy Kingdom military in that area of sea quickly learned of the “change”.

When Frolaytia received word from a military doctor, she clapped her hands in the briefing room to gather everyone’s attention.

“Rigas Blackpassion has committed suicide. At the same time, all of the Capitalist Corporations Objects in the area appear to have begun moving. That was some kind of trigger, dammit!!”

Little Wraith interrupted there.

“I question whether they really intend to win. The Capitalist Corporations has the Cayman Islands in the Central American ocean. Their wealthy hide their ugly sides by keeping their money there, so they cannot have the islands destroyed before they can withdraw their electronic money from their secret bank accounts.”

The ocean map projected on the wall was greatly rewritten. It had previously shown the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance fleet centered on the Baby Magnum staring down the Information Alliance’s Manhattan, but now a large Capitalist Corporations unit arrived from the side.

The operator raised her voice in a shout.

“I cannot get an accurate number thanks to their deceptive actions, but there have to be 20 to 30 in all! And they are all cutting-edge Second Generations!! Did they send in every one of the naval specialists guarding their home country on the west coast!?”

“...This will end the same way regardless. 760.”

That quiet comment came from the Melly Martini Extradry, the brown girl who wore a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper and whose butt was contained inside the swim ring. As its original owner, she had to know the Manhattan’s specs better than anyone.

Even with Frolaytia’s cold gaze on her, she moved carefully to avoid an explosion in her spine that was not receiving appropriate support from the ring that was only barely moving in its safe mode.

“That Idol Elite is not part of the Martini Series. If she can manually draw out more than 100% of its specs without relying on Capulet, not even 100 traditional Objects would be able to defeat her. Normal Objects would have to desperately protect the reactor at their core, but the Manhattan 000 is an extraordinary machine that does not have to worry about its reactors. 350. It does use the same reactors, but its entire concept as a weapon is different. And if it starts to move in ways not even we are familiar with, there is no predicting how far it can go.”

It happened a moment later.

The briefing room was supposedly surrounded by thick steel on all sides, but it was filled with a pure white flash of light. It took Heivia a few seconds to realize something had happened on the ocean being shown via projector. The footage was supposedly being corrected in real-time, yet it was still this bad. If they had actually been there, they might have gone blind.

The female operator shouted a report from her distant station.

“The Manhattan has begun to move. It was the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon!!”

“Damn, be on the lookout for artificial weather changes. Another major storm is coming!”

And once the footage on the wall reached their retinas once more, it showed hell itself.

Manhattan had finally begun to move as an Object of more than 20,000 meters.

First, the central electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon made a general strike which covered a radius of a few dozen kilometers. That dented in the surfaces of the Capitalist Corporations Objects. Once the turkeys had briefly stopped moving, the other cannons opened fire while spread out on either side like wings.

There were railguns, laser beams, coilguns, rapid-fire beam cannons, and low-stability plasma cannons.

There was no grand logic or system to it.

The weapons were simply fired with extraordinary power. As an extension of the most basic of strategies, great firepower was used to wear down the enemy force. Like an all-star pro baseball team hitting homerun after homerun against a quickly-gathered team of amateur boys.

Everyone knew the rules, so anyone could produce this same result if they did the same thing, right? It seemed to display that kind of confidence.

The Capitalist Corporations had supposedly sent in their greatest specialists.

The Offensive Mine, the Octoblade, and the Snipe. They were the top of the pyramid and they directly defended the home country of a world power. There were no greater warriors on the sea. It was doubtful whether Heivia's group could have defeated any one of them.

Yet it was as easy as taking candy from a baby.

They desperately returned fire with laser beams and low-stability plasma cannons, but as Oh Ho Ho operated Manhattan, she sometimes used low-stability plasma blasts to bend the path of a shot and sometimes swung that giant form to left or right to just barely dodge them. It was like a surfer riding a wave or like a bullfighter parrying a charging bull. Of course, all that moving around could not dodge laser beams, but she used the plasma "deflections" for that. The movements were so nimble they seemed to have no weight behind them. Such a large mass was being simultaneously attacked from multiple directions, but instead of letting thick armor deflect it, she did not allow any hits at all. That was why it looked so absurd and filled all who saw it with terror.

The way she surfed quickly back and forth while taking down the enemy with rapid-fire shots was far more polished than when Melly had worked with Capulet to destroy the five Faith Organization Second Generations. And it looked somehow familiar to Heivia.

Yes, it was a lot like the Rush's movements.

Also, the freedom of movement seemed to gradually rise with time.

"Dozens? No, hundreds!? How many reactors would it need to force its way through those kinds of actions!?"

"It was plenty shocking and more than enough of a threat for her to move the Manhattan 000 at all by considering the AI network's methods but using her own manual methods...but that Idol Elite is producing results that easily surpass 100% of the design specs while also distracting Capulet. This is

more than I ever imagined.”

Wraith sounded annoyed but also awed.

“She would never hold back against a foreign invasion,” said silver-haired and brown-skinned Lendy Farolito. “Plus, she has 10 million people, including her father, onboard with her. She will go all out to shake free of every last spark if it is to protect those civilians.”

“She’s the one that got them in this mess to begin with!!”

“That may be why she’s so intent on protecting them.” Myonri sounded dazed too. “N-now I’m wondering how the Princess managed to fight... The Manhattan is easily winning against 20 or 30 naval experts, but she fought it on her own to rescue us, didn’t she?”

That was answered by the Princess who was walking past the briefing room while leaning on the old maintenance lady’s shoulder. Due to exhaustion, sweat was visible on her doll-like face and her blonde hair was plastered to her cheeks.

She looked like a girl who had gotten up while she had a cold. The beads of sweat gave off the sweet smell of a girl while the Princess shared her information.

“It wasn’t too difficult. First, I didn’t have to worry about winning. I was only stalling for time, so I could focus on dodging. But the second reason was more important: no matter how extraordinary the Manhattan is, it’s still that loathsome Oh Ho Ho piloting it. It was fortunate I clashed with her in the Oceania District. I already knew the small idiosyncrasies of her movements.”

Just as Oh Ho Ho had learned Capulet’s small idiosyncrasies through Juliet, the Princess had not forgotten Oh Oh Ho’s small idiosyncrasies.

Everyone there could tell it was not as simple as she made it out to be.

Even if every one of the potatoes there was given a cutting-edge Second Generation Object designed to match them individually and developed a plan to attack Manhattan with 1000 Objects at once, not one of them would have agreed to stand before that monster.

But she had done it. She had gone that far, yet there was a life they had failed to save.

Quenser Barbotage had died.

The Princess was too exhausted to brush her bangs aside, but she still made a clear statement while the survivors like Heivia and Myonri watched her.

“...Quenser’s death is a sad thing.”

It was not that she was not shaken.

It was not that she had not been tempted.

“But I refuse to let her start a war over that. I will not let any of the survivors distort Quenser’s death for their own convenience.”

When he heard her perfect answer, Heivia found he could not look her straight in the eye. Did the Princess understand what his action meant? That delinquent noble had been unable to accept his awful friend’s death like that.

Regardless, the situation was underway.

Frolaytia thought with her long, narrow kiseru in her mouth, and then...

“Since the maintenance chief is away from her post, can I assume the Baby Magnum is back in working order? Then I have new orders for you, Princess. Fight. Please. We too will join the fight soon.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous,” said Heivia. “You mean we’re going out there to get hit by stray shells? Can’t we just let those Capitalist Corporations idiots get destroyed on their own!?”

“Look at this way: we can take advantage of this confusion. We have better odds than if we resume throwing stones after this is over. Do that and it will just lock onto us with pinpoint accuracy.”

Frolaytia cut off the footage filled with bright lights and deafening roars and instead focused on the dizzying changes on the naval map.

“As you know, the Manhattan is an extraordinary Object with a great number of reactors. And the Idol Elite herself is incredible too, so we can’t hope for the weapon to be too much for her to fully handle.”

“...”

“Since its reactors are as numerous as weeds, it is likely that targeting and destroying a reactor will not stop it like we are used to in anti-Object combat. ...With that much firepower, it is possible an explosion at one location could start a chain reaction that causes much greater damage, but I doubt that is realistic. Even if they are packed in boxes, there are 10 million civilians onboard if we include the visitors. I have not lost enough of my morals to forget that fact and attempt to sink it.”

"We can't do this and we can't do that. Then what are we supposed to do?" asked Heivia.

"Melly Martini Extradry. She is our greatest key." Frolaytia exhaled sweet pipe smoke in an apparent attempt to calm herself. "Manhattan should be under her control, but that Information Alliance Idol Elite has taken full authority of Manhattan through pure manual control and she is operating it as a weapon. She is using keyboards rather than the original control system. Oh Ho Ho only knows the online system viewed through a screen, so she may not understand the physical design diagrams. Do you see how that could present an opportunity?"

"You mean..." said short Myonri. "Since that Idol Elite is controlling Manhattan herself while keeping Capulet away like a kitten, she might not be in the actual cockpit...? She doesn't know where it is, so she's intervening through a cyber-attack opening? And so she might be exposed in an apartment or car somewhere in the city of Manhattan?"

"Manhattan is not allowing a single lucky hit through, but that may be driven by more than simple philanthropy. She can't have a stray shot fall into the city and reduce her to ashes."

In other words...

Looking at it in reverse...

"If we knew where exactly the Idol Elite was located, we could make a counterattack. We would only need to crush that single point while leaving Manhattan as a whole intact."

"You-...!?"

Lendy started to yell something, but she ultimately held her tongue with a bitter look on her face. She knew nothing she said here would get through to them.

Frolaytia glanced over to observe Lendy's actions as she continued.

"The Baby Magnum will head back out and draw Manhattan's attention. Meanwhile, our real goal is searching for the Idol Elite's location. Fortunately, this incident seems to have woken up the peace-dulled higher ups in the safe countries. They've lent us a relic of an older age."

"What kind of relic?"

"A Mobus Variant. Simply put, a laser sniping system is sent into satellite orbit, it circles the earth a few times to stabilize its orbit, and then it fires on a certain point on the surface. Shockingly, it is equipped with an atomic battery. The victory of Objects eliminated nuclear weapons from the world, but as long as it isn't 'directly' used, it apparently doesn't violate the treaties." The busty silver-haired commander crossed her arms such that they pushed up her large breasts. "We use that to fire a laser down from the heavens to eliminate the Idol Elite. It moves at the speed of light. The overall

power might seem insufficient in this age of Objects, but its speed can't be beat. It would be one thing if she was in a shelter or a tunnel, but there is no better assassination method for directly targeting someone. It will all fall apart if she predicts the location of this game piece, but if she doesn't know about it, not even she can dodge it. By the time she notices, she and the piloting equipment will have been vaporized."

If Oh Ho Ho had known Manhattan's layout and had been inside the proper cockpit covered in thick, nuke-resistant armor, there would be nothing they could do.

Although that would have changed their respective positions for better or for worse.

"But how do we get that information? You make it sound like spying from a satellite won't be enough."

"If the Idol Elite is in the subway tunnels or inside a building, we cannot rely on overhead surveillance. The people packed in resin boxes still have body heat, after all."

"Surely you aren't telling us to climb back onto that monster," said Heivia. "Just to be clear, that wouldn't be possible even if you made a million clones of me for extra lives."

"You don't need to do that," casually said Frolaytia. "Because someone has already gotten onboard. Or should I say, someone never escaped."

"...Wait. You're kidding, right?"

Come to think of it, he had only been told about his Legitimacy Kingdom group and Wraith's Information Alliance group being collected. But nothing had ever been said about the Faith Organization.

"Skuld Silent-Third."

Frolaytia Capistrano was another person familiar with the nightmare sealed away within the Madagascar Report. She knew this was dangerous enough to leave the category of war altogether, but she still made the suggestion.

"She remains hidden in Manhattan and we have managed to contact her. ...This truly is a worst case scenario, but it looks like our only option is to trust a report from that serial killer."

Part 7

It was less exciting than expected.

That was Skuld Silent-Third's honest opinion about being left alone in Manhattan. Her plan had been to remain in the center of the city while pretending to be defeated and then send the Manhattan after the Legitimacy Kingdom as they desperately attempted to confirm her death. Once the ocean was littered with wreckage, corpses, and other detritus, she could steal a functioning vehicle and drift through the ocean. In the best case, she had hoped to slip out from under the Faith Organization's watchful eye, but...

(Hmm, they recovered more quickly than I expected. Restarting all that from here might be difficult.)

The combat mobility had shaken her enough for gravity to lose its hold on her, but that had stopped for the moment.

While rage boiled within the Idol Elite, she had been able to manipulate that girl who controlled the Manhattan, so Skuld would be in trouble if the girl calmed down.

Of course, not even Skuld could directly pilot the Manhattan. She needed the Idol Elite to put in the effort of her own volition. Threatening her would be meaningless. If this conflict ended with the girl's death, the Capulet AI Network would return to normal. And then Skuld would be immediately killed as an enemy of the Information Alliance.

(Should I kill her father, Royce, to shake her again? No, doing the same thing again would be boring...)

The clear cubes visible here and there contained Manhattan residents with carefree looks on their faces. Skuld had tried picking up a metal pipe and hitting them, but it had been no use. Instead of being solid, they were springy, like rubber or gelatin. Plus, these protective shields were meant to endure the combat mobility of the world's largest Object. Human hands would not be enough to break through.

That meant she would have trouble killing Royce if she tried. And if she viewed the cubes like Object armor, not even her bombs were likely to work.

Unless she caused some confusion here, she was like a bird in cage while on Manhattan. First of all, the extraordinary Object's warning system prevented her from escaping and, even if she did escape into the ocean, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization's naval forces were waiting.

(What should I do...?)

She rubbed her fingertips across her slender chin.

(Which option would be the most fun?)

That was her priority, not her life.

And after a lot of thinking, the twintail girl arrived at a conclusion.

She fished through the equipment of one of the many dead Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers and grabbed the radio.

“I guess I’ll contact the Legitimacy Kingdom and save the world! After I do that, I can figure out what to do next!!”

Part 8

“Shit!!”

Once she was guided from the briefing room to a guest room, silver-haired and brown-skinned Lendy Farolito spat out a curse.

The Manhattan 000 could not be destroyed with direct firepower, so they were going to pinpoint target the out-of-control Pilot Elite. It made sense, but she could not allow it. She wanted to stop it however she could, but she lacked the actual ability to do so. Even now, there would be two muscular guards right outside the door. Her weapons had been confiscated, so she could not even eliminate those two. She knew the situation was extremely pressing, but she could not find anything to do.

Except...

“...”

Once she judged the timing was right, Lendy reached inside her uniform’s short skirt. She had had a good reason for altering her electronic medical records and implanting an unnecessary metal bolt inside her body to have an excuse when a metal detector went off. She had more than 10 components hidden inside her uniform and underwear so they would slip through a search. Once she assembled them, she had a radio smaller than a pack of cigarettes. The antenna was larger than the rest of the device because it used satellite phone technology. It was originally so she could call for rescue. It could make a call from anywhere on the planet, but to give it such a small size, it could only be used for 3 minutes. She could only give a short warning to the Pilot Elite on the distant Manhattan. Also, the Legitimacy Kingdom was not dumb. Once they detected a signal coming from here, they were sure to restrain Lendy immediately. She would only have one shot at this. One shot with the silver bullet known as information.

She did not care if she was arrested and court martialed. She was willing to live out her life in an enemy nation’s prison or even be shot on the spot.

She had to think.

When, where, and what should she transmit? How she used this one silver bullet could mean the life or death of that girl.

And just before she made up her mind...

"...?"

Lendy raised her beautiful face. Something was not right. As a soldier, she was fairly sensitive to people's presences, but the pressure from beyond the door had vanished. She stuck the rescue radio in her pocket and cautiously approached the metal door.

She tried silently opening it and found both guards collapsed on the floor.

Lendy had not lived a normal enough life to immediately scream. She quietly crouched down and checked on the corpses. Countless screws, nails, and other fragments had pierced the front of their bulletproof vests. Those were used to increase the power of explosions, not gunfire. Still crouched down, she looked up and saw the knob of the nearest waterproof door had also been sliced off with great firepower. But she had not heard anything like an explosion. Nor had she heard any screams or shouts from the two professional guards.

Was the mysterious explosion the work of a combat engineer who specialized in that sort of thing?

A certain individual's face flashed through her mind, but...

(No, Skuld Silent-Third should be on the Manhattan right now.)

Then who else could it be?

Whose example had that serial killer been following when she began using plastic explosives for her killing? Who had originally wielded the Legitimacy Kingdom military explosive known as Hand Axe?

Who was that complete amateur who still managed to destroy the occasional Object and had won that girl's heart with that unique ability?

"Hi."

When she heard that sudden voice, Lendy grabbed a carbine from one of the corpses and quickly turned around to find someone standing there.

This was completely unexpected.

She kept the gun aimed at him while her instincts told her this was not enough. This person had killed the two heavily-equipped guards without even giving them a chance to cry out.

In that seemingly perfect yet imperfect state, the silver-haired and brown-skinned commander asked a question.

“Who...are you?”

That was the issue.

Even if they were an enemy, she would not have sounded so confused if she had recognized them.

Lendy Farolito had no idea whatsoever who this person was.

“Module Quenser,” whispered the mystery man.

He must not have been the type to show off with his clothing. The gray-haired man of at least 70 wore a cheap gray suit that could be bought anywhere. But he wore something else on his back. ...What was it? It looked something like a cross...but, no. It was a sword. He was equipped with a unit that resembled a sheathed double-edged sword. The kind of chains seen on bicycles or chainsaws extended from the sword and attached to gears on his shoulders, elbows, wrists, thighs, knees, and ankles. All of the chains glittered green like emerald.

But the old man himself was even stranger. The look on his face was innocent. It was a childlike expression that seemed entirely removed from worldly interests.

“It is very user-friendly, but it leaves a lot of openings when breaching a single point.”

Asking further seemed pointless.

Lendy placed her finger on the trigger, but then the old man moved without warning.

His movements did not seem so much fast as oddly timed.

The green chains produced a disconcerting sound of rapid rotation. Just as Lendy noticed that, he approached like the wind, grabbed the carbine, lifted it straight up, and pressed his other hand against the silver-haired, brown-skinned commander’s throat. Was he trying to strangle her or break her neck?

“Module Skuld. ...Yes, this is much easier to use here.”

It seemed very much like a prototype. It was incredible the rapidly-rotating chains did not catch on his hair, skin, or suit. And strangely, the wrinkly old man's movements were oddly girly. He could have played a female role in the Island Nation's kabuki.

Or did that have something to do with the name he had mentioned?

"So..."

The trembling of her brown throat let her feel the sweaty hand pressed against it.

"Does that sword-like...thing use the chains to reproduce the behavior of a specific individual? Does it use their motion data to support your own actions with the chains? But I doubt nothing more than chains and gears could protect your body's joints."

"We are not trying to do it all with just that. Everyone's skeletons and muscles are the same, yet successful people's movements can be classified into their respective fields. Why is that?"

"..."

"What matters is the gait and center of gravity used by the individual. So more than just the simple movements, their individual rhythms form their internal clock which alters them on the inside. And people face the general concept of time based on the planet's rotation and revolution. Ascend to those heights, and you can obtain it. They say different people see the world differently, and I could not agree more."

Was the person controlling the machine, or vice-versa?

Lendy belonged to the Information Alliance, but even she found it odd to see an obvious contraption externally manipulating the movements of his limbs.

"We of the Faith Organization stand opposite of you in the Information Alliance. We do not treat the Pilot Elites as a component of the giant military system known as an Object. In fact, we look for the charisma of a strategist or commander in an exceptional individual person and we focus on drawing out their individuality and characteristics as much as possible. Although since that involves things like synesthesia and perfect pitch, you outsiders sometimes misinterpret it as esper research."

"Faith...?"

"Oh, did I forget to introduce myself? I am Tyrfing Boilermaker. Back home, I am known as the Venerable Elder. I am really not worth introducing, but I stand on the side of good. Of course, my identity is not worth hiding either."

He was even higher ranked than the Founders. In Legitimacy Kingdom terms, he was a major king. In Capitalist Corporations terms, he was the president of a major conglomerate or international corporation.

“It could be Sladder Honeysuckle, Putana Highball, Mariydi Whitewitch, or even the rumored Nyarlathotep. Oh, excuse me. I was not trying to say we have no interest in the Information Alliance’s people. At any rate, we focus on the body and mind of individual humans. So we gather data on enemy and ally strategists and commanders and then attempt to faithfully reproduce them or escalate them further. It should be no surprise that we would be researching such things.”

In other words, this old man was both a single person and multiple people.

He could freely switch between different strategists and commanders. Did he have hundreds, thousands, even more? He might as well have had countless monsters waiting behind him.

“Since you attacked me - part of the Information Alliance minority - instead of the Legitimacy Kingdom majority, does this have to do with the Manhattan 000?”

“Attack you? Perish the thought.”

He gave a bright smile that did not match his age at all.

He then spread his arms and casually waved his hands which could kill at any moment.

“I have a merciful heart, so if I intended to kill you, I would have done so before you even knew I was here. With a metal jet, I could painlessly slice through your heart from the other side of the wall. To be honest, I want you to work even harder. That is why I arrived to set you free. Only because I was already here, though.”

“Work...harder?”

“I mean, it looks like the Legitimacy Kingdom might succeed.” He sounded exasperated. “I can’t have this ending in an anticlimax now. The Faith Organization has been ready to go from the beginning and the Capitalist Corporations has helpfully begun an unwinnable fight to buy enough time to withdraw their electronic money from the Cayman Islands. With each of their attacks, they inspire more hatred toward the Manhattan. No matter what the Information Alliance as a whole thinks, you cannot avoid being viewed as the aggressors here. That just leaves the Legitimacy Kingdom. If they would only take this seriously, we would have a global war between all four world powers. But for that, we can’t accept an easy ending where the Pilot Elite is sniped from satellite orbit. Faith Organization and Capitalist Corporations vs. Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance. The worst possible result is to settle into a 2-against-2 cold war where everyone sits still and glares at each other. Then nothing will happen.”

Save a life in order to spread the chaos of war.

Rescue an individual to throw all of humanity into the flames.

“What are you thinking...?”

“I wish to save everyone. Isn’t that the natural desire for the Faith Organization’s leader?”

His tone was smooth and she could easily forget the gravity of the situation if she let her guard down.

This old man had an invisible attraction that dragged in the souls of everyone around him.

“This age was a mistake. There is something wrong with these clean wars. Everyone says so, but none of them mention what exactly needs to be fixed to bring everything back into order. And that false sense of understanding is the greatest cause of stagnation. So we will reveal the answer. We will show everyone what is wrong with the clean wars. We will show them how easily that transient structure collapses and that the world powers and the vague distinction between battlefield country and safe country are powerless. Then the people wandering through this chaotic age are sure to see the truth. We will all look ahead to the coming age. Whatever form it takes, no one will attempt to bring back the broken clean wars. Because we will have already proven they were a mistake.”

The Norse myth of Ragnarok did not end with the gods fighting and being destroyed.

After all the gods and giants were destroyed, the story ends with some immortal gods and a few human survivors appearing and creating a new world.

If that final battle had not happened, Odin and the other arrogant gods would have continued oppressing the humans, elves, giants, and other species.

This old man had introduced the nonexistent idea of the Ragnarok Script and attempted to drag all four world powers into the conflagration of war, so was he too a consequence of that?

Tyrfing.

It was not clear if that was his real name, but it came from a Norse magic sword that would take a life and return to its master each time it was drawn but would ultimately destroy its master as well.

He had sent word of the nonexistent Ragnarok Script to the Capitalist Corporations, used that to spread chaos through the Information Alliance, shaken Piranirie and the rest of the Martini Series with active self-denial (even if it was actually an illusion), set the Manhattan 000 in motion, and even released Skuld Silent-Third to sow further chaos.

He was the source of it all.

This old man had drawn up the blueprints for it all.

Lendy grimaced and asked a question of the old man who wore a sheathed magic sword strapped to his back with green chains.

“Are you saying you’re willing to die yourself?”

“If necessary, I will accept any death. Walking out ahead of everyone and providing an example of how to behave is the duty of a religious man.”

He had no hesitation or fear.

Skuld Silent-Third had seemed twisted, but had that really been entirely a matter of her personal qualities? If all cultures sought the power to conquer the fear of death, then the Faith Organization may have focused more on psychological matters than on physical fortresses and weapons. ...Yes, take humans far enough and they might just reach this point.

“Now.” The Venerable Elder stepped aside to clear a path down the corridor. “Struggle desperately for happiness. Ragnarok does not simply mean death. It is a small number, but there are some survivors who create the next age. The people around me are trying to make me one of them, but I am honestly not that interested. But you are different, aren’t you? If there is something you care about more than your own life, then I believe now is the time to act, not the time for distractions.”

“...”

“The optical bombing from the Mobus Variant is not much of a threat if you know it is there. Simply put, you only need to hide below a roof thick enough to defeat its specs. Even a standard subway tunnel should be effective. That is why it is known as relic that could not overthrow the age of Objects. It is up to you how you contact Manhattan, but just one quick warning will resolve this: watch out. She might not listen to an outsider like me, but that Elite is sure to heed your words. And you have no obligation to the Legitimacy Kingdom. Protecting their plan is a task for them, not for the Information Alliance. You can shatter the pre-established harmony. There is no value in the old rules of the world which produce nothing, save no one, and yet continue to restrict us all. We must rebuild the world from the very foundation, even if that means tearing it all down first.”

This may have been the chance she was looking for.

It may have been the moment to gain the freedom she needed to save that girl.

However.

“!!”

“Oh?”

Lendy gave up on the stolen carbine and held out a sidearm handgun instead. She had stolen it with some sleight of hand while swiping the other firearm from the corpse. She repeatedly pulled the trigger, but it was like trying to push together identical poles of two magnets. With the disconcerting sound of rapid rotation from the green chains, Venerable Elder Tyrfing Boilermaker casually dodged the bullets.

“Back in Madagascar, it seems Skuld feigned weakness to inspire a protective desire. Based on her specs, she should be able to pull this off.”

The old man was far stranger than any self-styled espers and he never stopped smiling. He had likely caught on to what she was doing. Lendy Farolito had not expected to hit this monster with normal bullets. This old man had taken a step into the occult, so killing him would require something like Odin’s spear. Nevertheless, the gunshots had sounded. They had to have echoed throughout the ship with a far more sinister noise than if she had simply shouted. She had informed the others of the emergency. There would be no hiding the intruder’s presence even if she was defeated here.

“I was always going to save that girl no matter what anyone does.”

“I see.”

“To be honest, your intervention is nothing more than a nuisance. So get lost. It affects my purity. The stage has no room for you and your sudden appearance!!”

“You are even more virtuous than I imagined. But unfortunately, I have currently chosen Module Skuld. Her motto seems to be that a strong offense is the greatest defense, so I will likely act accordingly.”

His fingers had been gently swaying, but now they came to a complete stop.

He did not hesitate to take a step toward Lendy as she aimed the handgun at him.

He looked truly regretful, but with the thorough support of the chains and magic sword, the old man perfectly reproduced the sinister and beautiful motions of a serial killer who had experienced the joy of killing in the very core of her being.

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

Part 9

The dry gunshots reached the busty silver-haired commander and Heivia's ears.

"Don't tell me they were given liquor before the mission is even over. What idiot switched off their safety like it's some kind of festival!?"

"No. Everyone, be on full alert. Don't assume it was an accident. Assume a rat and hit them with everything we've got."

After all, sneaking aboard a maintenance fleet and attacking from within was the exact strategy they had used against Piranirie Martini Smoky. If they could do it, so could someone else.

The Baby Magnum had already left now that its armor had been quickly replaced.

Even if the Princess knew the Information Alliance Oh Ho Ho's small idiosyncrasies, that was not enough to call an absolute trump card. Without logistical support, she would be quickly defeated and that would be that.

"Skuld! Something has come up on our ship. We'll give you some time to act freely, but we might not be able to provide immediate support. Locate the target ASAP."

"Sure thing. This place is so boring with everyone frozen. There's no life in them. So if hers is the only soft flesh on Manhattan anymore, I'll just go search her out."

"...I already have a really bad feeling about this," said Heivia. "So what should we do?"

"Data processing," replied Frolaytia. "The Princess might be able to see through to Oh Ho Ho's individual idiosyncrasies, but she needs data on the surrounding environment to act on that knowledge. We will act as her eyes and ears by analyzing all the data from the radars and sensors, rewriting it in an understandable format, and sending it to her. In other words, the standard."

(Even her orders are decent when Quenser isn't here.)

A fairly inappropriate comment passed through Heivia Winchell's mind, but unsurprisingly, the word "decent" did not apply for long. As he stared at the LCD display like the radar analyst he was, he saw an unbelievable reading.

"Wahh, wah, gyahh!? Warning, warning!! Something like a wall is approaching. It's probably a wave produced by the Manhattan!!"

"Grab onto something!!"

The busy commander's instructions arrived too late.

The wave slammed into the side of the giant warship and Heivia was tossed all the way to the wall. And the shaking did not end there. Their vision rose and fell over and over while the entire ship tilted diagonally. The high and low points of the waves differed by more than 10 meters. It was like being repeatedly dropped from a mountain into a valley.

The desks and LCD monitors were bolted in place, but they flew into the air with the sound of snapping metal. They could easily be crushed by their own machinery in the closed room, like a ball mill that ground up materials with stones.

And it did not end there.

"Report: the waves have knocked the fleet out of formation! At this rate, we will collide with the Cesare positioned alongside us!!"

"Tch!! Can we recov-...no, you wouldn't have reported it like that if so. Heivia, gather a small group of the more nimble soldiers!!"

Frolaytia shouted that while tossing over a few large backpacks located nearby. They were stuffed full of computers for communication soldiers.

"This won't end with just the one ship. There's going to be a chain-reaction of collisions, but we can't lose our connection to the Princess. We could easily lose the relay equipment on the ships, so make sure you survive and continue supporting the Princess!!"

"Are you serious...? Hey, Myonri, you're coming with me!! I'm not suffering through this alone!!"

"Thanks for the worst invitation in the history of the world!!"

With another powerful impact, Heivia and Myonri were torn from gravity's grasp and had their backs slammed into the ceiling. But this was something other than a wave. It was accompanied by the disconcerting sound of thick steel being crushed.

"...Ugh, cough. We really did hit our own ally. This ship is going to sink. The rest of you need to prepare boats for yourselves!!"

"We can take care of ourselves," said Frolaytia. "Hurry up and get that communication equipment out of here!!"

Heivia and Myonri entered the corridor with the giant backpacks on and made their way to the deck. The impact must have broken some pipes and started some fires because some areas were smoky.

“What exactly are we going to do?”

“Jump over to a surviving ship. Give this your all. If we fall into the ocean wearing these, it’s over. C’mon!!”

After pressing his shoulder against the metal door to push it open, a powerful gust of wind pushed back at them.

The sky had been perfectly clear before, but it was now filled with thick storm clouds. It felt as oppressive as being buried alive below the bedrock.

“Dammit, is this because of that electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon!?”

In the blowing rain, the giant gray ship was as misshapen as a crushed candy box. A destroyer that was meant to protect them from external threats had collided with their small aircraft carrier.

While focusing on the wind, Heivia and Myonri jumped over the bent surface of contact to board the other ship. There was of course no guarantee of safety. If their leg was caught between the two ships, it would be bitten off by those steel teeth.

“Is this really the right thing to do!?” asked Myonri. “I feel like all those missiles are about to explode!!”

“Look ahead. See that burning supply ship approaching!?”

“Gyah!!”

“Just jump to the next one, idiot!!”

There was no hope of putting out that fire, so the crew would be jumping into the ocean. Just as Heivia and Myonri jumped onto a radar ship that approached at just the right time, the flaming supply ship collided with the destroyer that had more missiles than guns.

What followed was like an accident at a fireworks festival. Countless missiles and torpedoes were blown away inside their metal tubes in a chain reaction of explosions. Some were anti-air, some were anti-surface, some were anti-ship, and some were anti-sub, but they would all blow a flesh-and-blood human to smithereens.

“This is the worst!!”

Despite what Heivia shouted, they had yet to see how bad it could get.

Myonri was the first to notice. Radars were attached to the front wall like tiles or a bug's compound eye and the light next to them had changed from green to red.

"Ah, the radars are activating!!"

"Are you kidd-...aaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!?"

They could only scream.

Just before they were hit by microwaves far more harmful than a microwave oven, they pushed open a metal door and dove into the protected ship. Their soaked uniforms were heavy. It was no longer just the communication equipment on their backs. They felt like they had weights hanging from every part of their body.

"Damn, is my big magnum all right!? That didn't fry humanity's greatest treasure, did it!?"

"I think it fried your brain first! You can stick the contents of a balled-up tissue under the microscope later! We aren't safe here either, so we need to get out of here!!"

The next impact was more of an explosion.

With lots of sparks, the ship's lights went out, but they did not have time to worry about that. One of the destroyer's shells or missiles must have hit because a nearby wall was torn away, leaving a gaping hole.

"Ah."

Just as they felt the floor shaking below them, Heivia and Myonri tumbled toward that large hole.

And right before they fell, a giant dark submarine parted the water and surfaced like a whale.

Heivia and Myonri just barely managed to avoid falling into the water with so much extra weight, but they could not exactly rejoice. That spectacular emergency surfacing was shown off in military exercises, but it was generally only done in a crisis when the submarine needed air.

"It's not just on the surface. Are they colliding with each other like billiards balls below the water too!?"

This would not last forever.

The gray ocean was full of debris: a ship's armor panel, a large tank, a pin-up poster, etc. Even

without the heavy communication equipment, if they fell into the water, they would probably be crushed between the jagged metal floating in the waves.

“Eek, eek...”

“Myonri, brace yourself!! Roll off and I’ll have to give you the mouth-to-mouth punishment!!”

“No, thank you! And how much do you hate yourself to acknowledge it would be a punishment!?”

At this rate, Heivia and Myonri would be killed by their allies before the Princess was killed by the Manhattan.

But then a familiar voice reached them over the giant communication equipment they wore on their backs.

“Report, report. Target located.”

“Skuld?”

“One, three, cypher, alpha, lima, bravo. I repeat: one, three, cypher, alpha, lima, bravo. You can look that up on the grid, right? Then hurry up and finish her off with that laser!!”

Part 10

“Gh...”

Lendy Farolito held her right side, leaned back against a corridor wall in the sinking ship, and slid down to a sitting position. Her vision flashed in and out. She went limp and could not lift her butt from the floor. She had been stabbed by a jagged piece of metal, probably a byproduct of an explosion. It was less than 20cm, but the fact that it was duller than an industrially-made combat knife made it a brutal fang.

Venerable Elder Tyrfing Boilermaker was no longer there.

Would she survive or not? She did not know.

But the silver-haired, brown-skinned officer had something more important than her life.

Her trembling hand reached into her pocket and produced an emergency radio smaller than a pack of cigarettes. She extended the antenna which was larger than the rest of the device.

The attack had opened a hole, but the dark clouds must have closed it again. Since they did not immediately fire a second shot in that storm, the light and heat of the hit may have prevented them from getting an accurate view from orbit. Or maybe it took time to charge, or could only fire a single shot in the first place.

Whatever the case, the Pilot Elite had noticed the Mobus Variant, that optical bombing weapon targeting her from orbit.

She would not let that happen again.

She could defend against it by simply moving into a nearby subway station.

“Now, then.”

Skuld looked around as her vision gradually returned, but she did not see anyone. However, the girl had done a poor job of hiding. She was a fellow Elite, but she must not have been the fighting type. If Skuld used her hunter’s nose to track her, she could kill her. She could recover from this failure. The girl was probably somewhere on the Columbia University campus.

(But what should I do?)

She scratched her twintailed head and shook her small butt in time with the music playing around her while she began the pursuit. Before long, she saw the slender form curled up behind the counter of a café near the impact point. She was far smaller than Skuld had expected from how the others had talked about her. The actual blast had not hit her, but it looked like her entire body had been exposed to the secondary shockwave and small fragments. Without her special suit, her soft skin would have been shredded. Still, she would have difficulty moving very nimbly right away. She had shown an impressive attachment to life simply by dragging her body this far while nearly drowning in the tiny puddles on the ground.

“Are you...”

“Hm?”

“...going to...kill me...?”

The girl looked like she would kick the bucket all on her own, so Skuld clicked her tongue at that question. She liked killing fresh lives. Their death felt so raw specifically because they put up a fierce resistance and she had to restrain them with both hands. Skuld was a hopeless serial killer, but she was not cruel enough to torment a defenseless elderly person while pretending to provide care.

Also, what would await her if she followed the Legitimacy Kingdom’s instructions to the end? Would

she be handcuffed, judged in a foreign military court, and thrown in a cell for the rest of her life?

And even if she was returned to the Faith Organization, what would happen to her there?

(I'd rather not be put to sleep with drugs so I can be observed by those perverted old men.)

Despite what she had told Heivia and the others, she had been dissatisfied with that.

That left only one answer.

Skuld placed a hand on her skinny waist.

"I'm done. You're not my type."

"What?"

"Have you not read the Madagascar Report? If you were a boy who looked like that, you would score a perfect 100, but you really are just a girl. That's too straightforward and boring."

Also, the work van being used as a mobile console room had been vaporized. If the Legitimacy Kingdom's view was correct, that Idol Elite had been using a great number of keyboards. Once those were lost, she was done. Even her one-handed wireless keyboard was useless without the console to link back to. Most likely, this Elite could not do anything even if she did find the actual cockpit. The layout would be entirely different from what she had taught herself.

That meant the Pilot Elite could not control the extraordinary Object on her own any longer.

Simply put, the war was over.

"Ahh, ahh. Nothing's better than my teacher. Cute like a girl but willful like a boy. You can't get any better than that. It was just completely and utterly enjoyable."

With that simple statement, Skuld turned around.

Oh Ho Ho was supposedly her target, but she was so taken aback, she called out to her.

"W-wait! Where are you going!?"

"To find the cockpit. It doesn't matter if I can control it or not. This is what my teacher would do. I just know I'll find something interesting there."

The twintailed serial killer casually replied and waved without looking back.

And she spoke from the unique viewpoint of a lunatic.

“I feel like there’s still a piece missing here.”

Part 12

“I saw some light.”

Heivia spoke from atop the surfaced black submarine while the artificial storm pummeled him.

“I saw some light from the Manhattan’s direction. That was the bombing, wasn’t it? Did we do it!? For real!?”

“Ohh? But that ending would be something of a problem.”

Heivia and Myonri turned around in surprise when they heard an old man speaking like he was joining a chat over tea. While the submarine was rocked by the storm and waves, someone stood on the side deck of the radar ship that was starting to sink due to the missile explosion.

He was an extremely bizarre and innocent old man who wore a cheap suit, carried a double-edged sword on his back, and had chains extending to his arms, legs, and torso.

“Not even Module Skuld can accurately control the Second Generation Norn... But, well, as long as I can move it at all. It only needs to stir enough to point at something. We achieve our objective as long as the great social unrest causes all four world powers to clash. It doesn’t really matter if the Manhattan itself can fight. As long as the people think it can, we can bring salvation to a world that desires chaos.”

“What’s with this extremely immature old man with a magic sword on his back!?”

“Yes, I have no maturity whatsoever. My name is Tyrfing Boilermaker.” That old man gave no thought to his age and he was clearly saying something. “And one more thing: If necessary, I would like to approach the Manhattan now, but first I want to know that it has really stopped moving. I must apologize, but could you send your Object against it to see if it resists?”

“Huh?”

“You can do that, can’t you?”

Even in the storm, they could hear the disconcerting sound of the green chains rapidly rotating.

At the same time, the old man named Tyrfing had disappeared.

“That communication equipment on your back is being used to support your Pilot Elite’s decisions, so if you send out mistaken data, she should charge further and further forward without realizing she is headed to her death.”

“Behind...us...!?”

“Yes, the boy or the girl. I do not care which one assists me.”

When had he jumped over the debris-strewn ocean? By the time Heivia quickly turned around, Myonri was already unconscious in the old man’s arm.

Had he reached his arm around from behind and constricted her carotid arteries? Tyrfing Boilermaker gently set her down on the submarine and began talking with oddly feminine mannerisms.

They had entered an insane world where firearms were useless.

“This is known as Module Skuld. It teaches me by using my center of gravity and gait to alter my internal clock. So as long as that serial killer does not feign weakness, I can even use the blowing wind. You I do not recognize, so there must be no plans to create a Module from you. In that case, your standard techniques cannot keep up with my movements now that I have become one with various strategists and commanders. Too bad.”

“Wait a second. What are you talking about? Did I just stumble into a supernatural battle school story or an alternate-world reincarnation story!?”

“No one has researched humans themselves more than the Faith Organization, so if this world had the capacity for such things, we would surely have gained supremacy much sooner.”

Heivia could not afford to lose sight of the old man as he stood atop the submarine that floated in the ocean along with dishes that looked like a cross between a plate and a bowl, a convenience store bag, lightweight blankets, and other trash.

He knew that, but he could not imagine how he could make the first move. This monster did not care about cover or line of fire. He could approach while dodging a bullet fired straight at him, so what page of the military textbooks was Heivia supposed to reference?

Just then, something slowly extended over Heivia’s shoulder from behind him. It was a beautiful and

sinister curve of steel from the Island Nation. It was a katana blade thoroughly forged by expert hands.

The delinquent soldier could not look back, but the words of the person behind him stabbed into his ears.

“I am Bloodrics Capistrano. I shall be your opponent.”

A black tailcoat rapidly spun around to circle in front of Heivia. Tyrfing moved in response. He dropped a small plastic explosive at his feet and grabbed a thin, sword-like piece of armor that had come off of the submarine’s hull.

Heivia could follow it up to the point that they both made a light strike to judge the distance between them.

He also managed to keep up through the third flash of sparks.

But that was his limit.

He had no idea what was happening with the following exchanges.

After some silver and black flashes, he all of a sudden found the two men had their blades locked together. The battle had shifted from active to passive. Meanwhile, the old man was still smiling.

“Bloodrics Capistrano. I have your data recorded. If we both take the exact same actions, this will continue indefinitely. Of course, external factors like our weapons and positions are sure to alter the outcome.”

“That is no more than your personal and very selfish belief. As is the idea that the world desires chaos and the naïve estimation that you are unbeatable as long as you have your special equipment. In truth, I see no basis for those things beyond your words.”

“Is that so?” The Venerable Elder’s expression seemed to accept that his opponent was his equal. “An endless stalemate is such an ugly thing, so I think I will speed this up by altering my body’s axis. Module Skuld. ...My apologies if you die.”

An even more intense flash followed.

Bloodrics Capistrano’s katana swung in response.

Tyrfing Boilermaker had seemed untouchable, but his cheap suit tore and dark red blood was visible

on his upper arm and side.

But in exchange, Bloodrics fell to his knees.

“Gh!!”

“Injuring me is quite impressive for a member of the 5th prototype generation. And you there. Do not hold this defeat against him. He was definitely the greatest obstacle in my path today.”

The old man defended Bloodrics while also casually kicking him in the face to knock him aside. It may have been due to the Modules he kept mentioning, but his words and actions did not match at all.

“The greater they master their respective paths, the shorter a showdown between two experts will be. Expert chess players will grasp the flow of victory with their very first move. By the time an expert begins moving, they can already see the ending. They will never have a flashy and extended fistfight like in a kung fu movie or a close-quarters dual pistol battle. There is no such thing as a repetition draw in combat. I was always interested in Skuld as a tool.”

How were you supposed to deal with this using the logic of modern warfare?

Wouldn't he have to purify the demon world's land before challenging the great demon king? Even that ridiculous thought occurred to Heivia. If he did not do something, he would be killed far too easily and start his reincarnated life in another world.

“Could you assist me?”

Sorry I am so strong.

Tyrfing Boilermaker was seemed to be thinking exactly that.

“Even without you, I could steal the equipment, eliminate anyone who might interrupt me, and do it myself, but, well, I would prefer to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. ...On the other hand, I will spill any amount of blood if it is necessary.”

“Kh...!!”

Raising his carbine may have been a purely reflexive action on Heivia's part.

The old man only gave him a pitying look.

“Too bad.”

But immediately afterwards...

“Hold on. Are you getting forgetful, old man? Was your precious Skuld Silent-Third really that unstoppable a girl? Or are you indirectly praising us potatoes for having defeated her?”

The voice came from the communication equipment on Heivia’s back.

It made sense that someone else from the Legitimacy Kingdom would be able to contact it.

But that voice!

“In the Madagascar Report, that serial killer wouldn’t budge even if you sent the average Object against her. And guns and knives were useless after she abandoned the Trinity Style and fled.”

By then, the old man must have seen it out of the corner of his eye. Even with the warships colliding with each other and leaving fragments and wreckage floating in the water, there was one thing among the pin-up magazines and dishes that did not belong in a maintenance fleet.

It was colored white.

An inflated convenience store bag floated on the ocean. The number 52 was crudely written on it with thick permanent marker as some kind of sign.

Anything that did not sink would probably have worked.

Because the detonation only required a radio.

How did Tyrfing Boilermaker interpret it?

Did it remind him of Skuld or a certain boy?

At any rate, he spoke in the exact same way as the mystery transmission.

“But bombs alone she could not dodge.”

“But bombs alone she could not dodge.”

There was truly nothing he could do.

The more the old man tried to be Skuld Silent-Third, the less he could avoid this form of destruction.

Heivia lay on top of unconscious Myonri and Bloodrics and used the thick communication equipment as a shield just before the plastic explosive that had silently snuck up with the waves finally detonated right next to Tyrfing Boilermaker.

A wet sound rang out, the green chains arranged around his body audibly burst, and Heivia finally raised his head.

The backpack had apparently stopped the many small metal balls scattered to make the explosion more deadly. Heivia, Myonri, and Bloodrics were safe, but Tyrfing was nowhere to be seen. It was unclear if that had been a fatal blow, but it was unlikely his bones had survived unscathed. And if he had fallen into the ocean with broken bones, he was sure to drown.

“What the hell...just happened?” muttered Heivia.

But the communication equipment had been destroyed, so contact was cut off.

The plastic explosive was likely Hand Axe.

And a certain boy was oddly able to operate marine sports vehicles but not cars or motorcycles.

In other words...

“Is it really, truly you...Quenser!?”

Part 13

The raging storm had calmed and the ocean glittered bright red as it absorbed the color of the setting sun.

This was a small tropical island, a common sight in the Central American ocean.

It would likely be described as a desert island. It had a single palm tree and a large refrigerator that must have washed up from somewhere. The island had a radius of at most 10 meters, but it oddly showed no sign of sinking below the waves as a result of global warming.

But at the same time, someone who could land on the tiny and generic island was not supposed to “exist”.

The legends of ships suddenly vanishing in the Bermuda Triangle was proof of that.

Whether intentional or coincidental, everyone who discovered and landed on that island would “disappear” from the world. They were promised the full support of the Information Alliance, but in exchange, the secret was preserved by fully erasing their very presence from the vast network. It was like being rejected from the connections of human society and receiving the position of a god who sat one step removed.

The greatest privilege in a highly digitized society was not to be a king or president who stood above the masses in a high-risk/high-return position where a single wrong word would lead to an onslaught of criticism.

It was to be a skilled hacker who was unknown to the masses but knew everything about them. It was to fall into the gap of that no-risk/high-return position.

No one could escape the far-too-sweet temptation of being an emperor who stood one step to the side.

That was why they had all kept the secret so far.

“What’s this, what’s this? You got here first?”

A carefree voice rang out.

The ocean and the island were dyed by sunset. A twintailed girl had ridden a high-speed motorboat onto the opposite beach from a boy and she walked over to him with a smile. That girl with risqué undeveloped bodylines approached like a puppy.

“You always are first, aren’t you? Then again, that’s what makes you so worth obsessing over.”

“I would really rather you didn’t.” The blond boy slowly sighed. “So you managed to reach the island too, huh? I had a feeling you would find it no matter what you chose or what happened.”

“The Idol Elite was doing it all manually, but only over the network. The route was disguised thousands or even tens of thousands of times over, but the Capulet AI Network had to be secretly contacting the Manhattan somehow. They’re two separate things. So I thought I would find something interesting if I found the actual cockpit. For example, a way to send out an undisguised code for the AI network to pick up directly.”

In other words.

Skuld Silent-Third casually pointed at the large and beaten-up refrigerator that had washed up

below the palm tree.

“That’s Capulet’s core, isn’t it? Or was it upgraded to Anastasia for this generation?”

“...”

“No, a network wouldn’t have a core. It would be ‘stronger’ for it to all be parallel so that the system could survive even no matter what part of the world was enveloped in flames. So was there some other purpose? For example, maybe the AI company set this up as a breaker so they could bring down the entire network from here if it went berserk. Or maybe they were just more comfortable giving the network an obvious form. To put it in Faith Organization terms, it’s like how legendary goddesses are always drawn as beautiful women.”

At that point, the twintail girl placed her index finger on her slender chin and tilted her head.

If you forgot she was a pure serial killer, she would have looked like a fairy or something.

“By the way, everyone was saying you’re dead, so what was that about? A funeral gift scam?”

“Wraith put on an act.” The boy shrugged. “At the time, the Information Alliance maintenance fleet had sent down a small submersible. And Taratua’s outside group had only been told to search for the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. That left Katarina Martini free. She was overlooked.”

“Hmm. So she pretended to shoot you in the head or chest, dropped you in the ocean, and let someone else pick you up to escape in the submersible?”

“More or less. After Wraith pretended to shoot me and dropped me in the ocean, the silhouette of the approaching submersible may have been mistaken for a shark or something. Speaking of sharks, that kind of submersible apparently carries blood to lure sharks away during rescues. Anyway, whoever the target was going to be, that old woman apparently predicted Taratua’s cruelty perfectly.”

It was not the boy who had put on the act or collected him from the ocean, so there was nothing for him to brag about.

Wraith had so hated the old woman responsible for the genius girl project, so how had it felt for her to ultimately leave everything in Katarina’s hands? It would be nice if she had managed to get over her issues with her stepmother during the battle against Piranirie, but had that really happened?

Either way, she had to have been in a tough position ever since. No matter what kind of verbal abuse she received from the people she had fought with up to that point, she would not have been given a chance to clear her name of shooting an ally for self-defense.

Even if the girl had chosen that path herself, he could never make it up to Wraith. Without that choice, the boy really would have lost his life there.

“Wraith let me live because she focused on solving the issue from a viewpoint outside the four world powers framework. That’s why I didn’t report my survival back to the Legitimacy Kingdom. And this was the result. You may have been the only one to reach this island if I had stayed inside the framework.”

“Probably so.” Skuld put her hands on her hips and smiled innocently on the twilit island that felt even more detached from the busy world than a private beach. “But is that fridge really so important? I mean, what can you even do with it?”

Skuld Silent-Third’s indifferent tone made it clear which of the two options she placed more weight on.

The boy carefully observed the serial killer’s actions.

“Throwing the breaker is exactly what Tyrfing wants. The fall of the Information Alliance would lead to a war involving all four world powers.”

“So?” She looked confused. “Whether the world is filled with peace or slaughter, I will still kill. And I want to kill as many people as possible. I know you know what kind of person I am, teacher. You managed to stop me and you learned so much about me, so you must understand.”

“...”

“I will hide within the chaos of war and kill as I please. So a world-encompassing war isn’t a problem for me. In fact, I would appreciate the extra space to hide. Then I can enjoy so much death.”

Wasn’t that what Skuld had come here to do?

It was unlikely that serial killer had gone out of her way to do something unrelated to killing.

Wanting to stop a coming war would seem natural to the people of a peaceful country. But to those already soaking up to their shoulders in war, the two options could be hard to tell apart. Their everyday was war. They killed like it was normal. And to a true madwoman who had freely crossed the battlefield to satisfy her own desires, war was not even worth stopping.

“There’s something wrong with the current age.”

The serial killer spoke from a somehow innocent viewpoint.

Her eyes contained a light never seen in a normal person.

“The four world powers keep talking about these clean wars, but aren’t they so twisted? You understand after seeing so much war, don’t you? Stopping me will not end the tragedy. In fact, continuing like this might actually mean a greater number of victims. But you’ll let it continue? These clean wars focus entirely on being ‘clean’ and don’t protect anyone’s lives, so are they really worth believing in? Plus, we’re from the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization, but this is an Information Alliance system.”

The world’s breaker was within reach.

This would not end with just the Manhattan. No one knew what would happen, but at the very least, the world would enter a new age. Whatever form it took, there would be no going back. This was a one-time-use breaker with devastating power.

“C’mon, let’s do it.”

The twilight tropical island would provide liberation to anyone.

And a demon whispered there as if tempting a student into pulling the school fire alarm.

That hopeless girl’s voice was a temptation to slothful, degenerate, selfish, ephemeral, and sweet change.

“Let’s end the world. We can end it. Why we do it doesn’t matter. I’ll end it to kill and you can end it to save. Isn’t that good enough? The way things are is so oppressive and boring. So let’s just go for it and see what happens.”

The words of the insane were most frightening when they made a certain amount of sense.

Allowing the clean wars to continue would only mean more vague sacrifices they were barely aware of and it was obvious to everyone that it would not bring peace. Forcibly ending it might indeed require a powerful wake up call. Even if that would come with many sacrifices for a time.

However...

On top of that...

Quenser Barbotage placed his finger on his radio.

That was the deadly trigger which sent a signal to the electric fuse stabbed into the Hand Axe plastic

explosive.

“Oh?”

Skuld Silent-Third did not look at all displeased as she stood on that small, twilit island.

In fact, she smiled in apparent enjoyment of her opponent’s reaction.

“Can I ask one thing? Why are you fighting?”

“It isn’t even worth mentioning,” spat out the boy while toying with the clay-like bomb. “I owe Wraith Martini Vermouthspray big-time for what she did. I would have died if not for her painful and difficult decision. So no matter what might happen to the world, I can’t ignore that she wordlessly ordered me to save it. That’s why my objective was this island and not the Manhattan. Running to the same place where my companions were getting killed one after another would have just added another body to the pile. And after my investigation revealed the existence of this island, I knew you would be here. It wasn’t a rational thing. I just knew you would find your way to the last place anyone wanted you.”

“You’re so cool.”

The twintail girl said that in all seriousness.

And like magic, she now held something in her hand.

It was a Hand Axe plastic explosive identical to Quenser Barbotage’s.

Was that part of her admiration for her “teacher”?

The serial killer had not stopped updating. Left unchecked, just how far would her evil grow?

“But you understand, don’t you? This is an unknown desert island, so there is zero chance of your companions rushing in to save you like normal. An extreme battle against an Object would be one thing, but I don’t see how you can defeat me one-on-one as humans.”

“Have you completely forgotten the Madagascar Report incident? Who do you think ultimately brought that nightmare to an end?”

“Nee hee,” she laughed.

This was different from before. Skuld did not even try to hide her killer intent. But this was not the

same as malice or hostility. It was more like hunting. She was enveloped in the joy of a hunter who walked through the mountains and followed the footprints to find a great beast that could kill her if she made even the slightest mistake.

“Yes, yes. You really are wonderful... Quenser Barbotage is the best in the world. Cute like a girl and willful like a boy. You’re completely and utterly enjoyable.”

Quenser altered his view of her.

In the end, that may have been all there was to Skuld Silent-Third.

The heart of the Information Alliance, the fate of the world, and even enjoying countless deaths all came second.

What that pure serial killer wanted first and foremost was a second chance at tasting the flesh she had missed out on the first time around. That was all. That was why she had set out for the location he was sure to visit. She was truly insane because she did not hesitate to throw the world’s 7 billion people into hell for that purpose.

At the same time, Quenser Barbotage had to settle things with her too. There was also the silent promise he had made to Wraith. If he did not defeat Skuld, he could not continue onward. That was who she was to him.

With no concern for the world’s breaker sitting below the palm tree as a broken fridge, those two sworn enemies calmly observed each other’s actions.

Bomb vs. bomb.

They glared at each other with the exact same weapons in hand.

“Let’s do this.”

“I’m ready when you are.”

And...

The “choice” that would determine the fate of the world was made on an unknown tropical island.

<http://tl.rulate.ru/book/5253/330509>