

Chapter 2: We've Started Lending Out Weapons >> Technical Analysis Operation in the Hawaii District

Part 1

Hi, everyone! It's Monica, the battlefield idol reporter who can both sing and kill.

Am I ready to go?

No, not really.

So Quensette, huh? Did you see the search engine's trending terms? That legendary maid is right there at #1. Why must that demon in a maid uniform always go viral and stand in my way? Eh heh heh heh heh heh.

Oh, yes, yes.

I'll do it! I'll do it, okay!?

Ahem. Today I'm in the Hawaii District which is effectively controlled by the Capitalist Corporations. Aloha! It's technically a neutral blank zone, so it's full of tourists from all four world powers.

The Hawaii District has long been an important point in the ocean and they say whoever controls Hawaii controls the Pacific as a whole.

But not all islands are the same, so people will focus on them for different reasons. Some have the fresh water and crop land needed to be self-sufficient and some are a waypoint along several different ocean currents. And while Guam and Hawaii get all the attention, why were Easter Island and its Moai dropped from the front line of history despite being in the Pacific too? Pursue that question and you might just realize what it means to be an important point in the ocean. If you're interested, tune into Channel 2929.

Hmm, how was that for a rehearsal run?

4 minutes 30 seconds? Ugh, this is a 5 minute section, right? Wahhhh, it's way too short.

I can't do this. The human body isn't made to function without carbs. I can't do anything without some foood!! Assistant director, do a search and find somewhere nearby with good loco moco!

Eh? That was good?

Wait, wait, wait, wait!! Wait just a second!! I don't like the looks of that smile!! You had better use a

different take! I can't let everyone see me looking so unprofessional!!!!!!

Part 2

No swimming!! Lots of sharks this year!

"..."

"..."

The two Legitimacy Kingdom idiots did not bother asking why they had traveled all the way to Hawaii.

A warning was pasted over a sign that normally introduced a legend in which a god fished the islands out of the sea, but the problem was not that warning in the middle of the beach. No, it was the shocking scene before them.

"Why are those cuties in swimsuits running barefoot across the white sand to reach the ocean?"

"Didn't you know, Quenser? Humans are the creatures that attacked giant mammoths because we wanted to eat meat. Survival is just an excuse since we could have subsisted off of smaller prey like deer or rabbits."

They were on the beach.

To be more specific, they were at a restaurant that sold nasty frankfurters and toxic-looking sodas at tourist prices. It was like a fusion of an Island Nation seaside restaurant, a gas station, and a motel. It was actually a camouflaged observation bunker prepared by the Legitimacy Kingdom in the Hawaii District since that was technically a blank zone which belonged to no one. They used terms like crime prevention, intelligence, security, data collection, and sampling to make it sound better, but it all boiled down to some peeping by utter perverts. Sitting in an air-conditioned 2nd-story room using binoculars to spy on the skin nearly spilling out of so many bikinis counted as an official duty that earned a stable income from the people's tax money, so whoever approved it really deserved to be punched.

"Oh, the next bus is here."

"How many times have we switched busses now, dammit!? We've zigzagged around so much I feel like we must have made 3 full circuits of Oahu by now!"

This "bus" was really a canopied truck with the name of a pineapple plantation written on the side in the local language. By now, they were used to their hips taking a beating from the shaking of the poor suspension in the back of the deadly un-air-conditioned trucks. The two idiots and the rest of

the potatoes climbed into the back of this new one with dead eyes.

They had been shaken around by those trucks for 3 hours now, but they had yet to be informed where they were going.

"This is the worst. It's too damn hot for war. We came all the way to Hawaii, so why are we stuck smelling like an Island Nation judo uniform?"

"Neh heh heh."

Quenser heard an odd noise coming from Heivia, who was curled up in the seat next to him. This was not all that unusual for the harsh Legitimacy Kingdom military. The living conditions were so bad that following your orders and doing your duty was a good way to end up with a runner's high.

As the boy set off for a dream world with no help from certain substances, words began to escape his lips.

"Quenser, did you hear about the legendary maid that appeared in an Eastern European monastery hotel?"

"Gulp!?"

"The hotel staff said they have no idea who she was. Press from around the world saw her, but all their equipment was broken and no one managed to even snap a photo. 'Legendary Maid' is the top trending term right now. Rumor has it she's the ghost of some super cute maid who made an appearance to tell them how dangerous it would be to forcibly declare independence using an Object."

An unpleasant sweat soaked Quenser's back.

The story was taking an unexpected turn.

Legendary Maid Quensette had apparently reached the level of inhuman beauty. At this rate, the Capitalist Corporations' TechCiv would create a speculative design and the Information Alliance would create a 3D model to give her a life of her own as a Virtual Whatever-tuber.

The pineapple plantation truck arrived at a processing plant on the coast. It pulled up below a roof and Quenser spoke to a man in a work jumpsuit after leaving the truck.

"What do we do now?"

"Take a rubber motorboat out to sea. You'll join a destroyer battleship waiting there!"

"Damn the navy. Just because Objects have stolen their thunder is no reason to start inventing weird new kinds of ships."

Quenser and Heivia went in the direction indicated with a giant machete probably used for chopping the leaves off pineapples. Any leisure shop in Hawaii would probably have something nicer than the rubber motorboat they found waiting for them. To keep sharks away, the bottom was covered with bright red and orange warning colors reminiscent of an anemone and it was loaded with sugarcane.

They left the concrete bank.

Traveling straight from the pineapple processing plant to the destroyer battleship would blow their cover, so they made sure to pass below a random bridge and toss all the sugarcane into the sea to change their appearance for the satellites.

And eventually...

"?"

While they soared across the ocean, the water split open right next to them and a large silhouette jumped out.

But this was nothing as adorable as a dolphin swimming alongside them. This was an 8m mass of muscle the size of a truck.

It was a real great white shark.

"Watch out!!"

Once Heivia realized what it was, he drew a military handgun known as the Bear Killer, but the giant shark moved away as if it had lost interest.

Quenser had felt entirely helpless, so he wiped sweat from his brow.

"The entire ocean is learning. The shark understood the threat your gun posed. This is like a river full of black bass that can't be caught with normal lures."

"Yeah, this isn't looking easy."

Heivia did not return the gun to its holster for a while. It might have an engine, but they were in a

rubber boat.

“With this lend-lease program, I can only imagine our mission is going to end in failure and pain.”

Boarding the destroyer battleship as soon as possible was the only option they had.

Why did that ship have a name that made it sound both big and small at the same time? Quenser was imagining something like a monstrous magnum that was a handgun but required a shoulder rest to avoid breaking your wrist, but as they continued on in the rubber boat which was (fairly ineffectually) protected from sharks by its anemone warning lights, they arrived at an old-fashioned heavy cruiser with its anchor lowered. The gray ship was nearly 200m long and covered in giant rapid-fire gun turrets and vertical launched cruise missiles. It also had jet stream propulsion devices extending from either side.

“So they’re just trying to make it as powerful as possible? Do they think they can reach an Object’s level by moving faster or something?”

“That’s ridiculous. Think of a car’s speedometer. The max speed on a straightaway is entirely different from the normal speed while making small turns. If this ship tried to sidestep at speed, it would break right in half.”

The ship lowered what might as well have been a rope ladder, so Quenser and the others boarded the baffling destroyer battleship (which had likely soaked up a ton of the people’s tax money).

Before entering the conference room inside, they found Frolaytia in the smoking area partway down the narrow corridor.

There was no definite “right answer”, but their attempt to make a quick exit was a mistake today.

“Oh, oh, oh? What’s this? Shouldn’t you be showing a bit more respect for your commanding officer?”

“Oh, no. She’s sulking even more than I expected! Y’know, it takes some doing to be this much of a pain in the ass when you have the silver-hair, giant tits, 18-years-old, and beautiful commander things going for you!!”

“Curse that clingy commander. If she wants our attention, she’d better change into a bunny suit.”

But in the extreme hierarchy of the military, there was nothing they could do. There was something wrong when they were government workers, but the labor supervisors had no authority here. There was little chance of them getting any vacation time or a mid-day siesta any time soon.

"I had thought this sounded complicated from the beginning," said Frolaytia.

This was dangerous.

It was like starting a conversation with, "You know how I can be really dumb sometimes?" They were about to have to keep nodding like a machine to get through a long story rivalling a school principal's speech.

"They said it was a lend-lease program for old model weapons."

"That thing where we let other people use the weapons we're no longer using, right?"

Quenser frowned even as he tried to be conversational.

Lending out their old weapons had a number of merits.

By strengthening the enemy of your enemy, you could attack your common enemy from multiple fronts at once. And even when that was not the case, weapons were sometimes lent to outsiders as a bit of a gamble. That was especially useful when you wanted a certain war result but did not want any of the deaths officially counted against you. It could also be lucrative to force an exorbitant asking price onto the buyers.

Needless to say, war cost money and it killed people. If that was a problem, you could always find someone to work some magic on the paperwork and rewrite those numbers in the official records.

"Money and lives. If they're worried about the numbers on the strategic documents..."

"The year goes by quick, doesn't it? We've already reached the customary end-of-the-year performance. Although if it weren't for this, we would start seeing anti-war protests demanding we protect the precious lives of the youth and stop wasting tax money."

Simply put, it was an underground business run by the government.

It was the same as a country spreading white powder around and calling it a drug war. In this case, they were lending out tons of weapons like an arms dealer in order to rebalance the war situation.

In this case, it was about the influence the four world powers had in the Hawaii District.

That said, weapons were full of secrets, so if you let someone else use them, they were sure to be analyzed down to the last screw. It was an odd world where you were telling stealth fighters not to crash and tanks not to get stuck in the mud even if they were destroyed. No matter how thoroughly

you checked the buyer's identity, it was insanity to hand over a weapon with the maintenance manual included. You might as well be throwing all your military secrets in a shared folder.

Frolaytia slowly shook the long, narrow kiseru in her mouth as she spoke.

"That's why they chose the outdated weapons that are past their expiration date and about to be retired from service."

"Have they never heard of intellectual property!? You never know when that will lead someone to a breakthrough in whatever tech they're trying to develop!"

"These things have been in service long enough that they'll have already been pried from a corpse's hands and analyzed."

It was nothing but excuses. It sounded like asking someone if they had done their homework and having them say, "I was about to, but you just killed all the motivation I'd worked up!" The words of an engineer – especially one in training like Quenser – did not hold much weight.

"This was originally meant to send weapons to those that want to break free of the Capitalist Corporations' control over the region, right?"

"That's oversimplifying things, Heivia. First of all, the Hawaii District is a blank region, so no one controls it. Even if the Capitalist Corporations act like they own the place."

"And we're trying to get in their way?"

"Not yet, Heivia. Don't be hasty."

Frolaytia breathed an exasperated sigh mixed with tobacco smoke.

The Hawaii District did not belong to anyone, so each of the four world powers was doing them the "favor" of protecting it. The Legitimacy Kingdom armed the coastguard, the Faith Organization worked to preserve the Hawaii and Polynesian mythology and culture, and the Information Alliance ran the mass media stations, but the Capitalist Corporations had the most control by maintaining the power and water infrastructure. And when you had a monopoly on the schools and hospitals, you would have the most influence.

"The problem is the charity work they're doing: the Oxyocean Operation. They claim to be bringing life back to the hypoxic area of ocean known as the Sea of Death, but..."

"Are they pumping air in like for a tropical fish aquarium?"

"Yes, that. Although the scale is far greater. They've set up a ton of ridiculous pumps that dissolve oxygen into the ocean at a rate of tens of thousands of liters per minute."

"Isn't there only so much that can dissolve into the water no matter how much they send in?"

"Don't ask me." Frolaytia dismissed the student's question. "Although I was told they draw the seawater into the device, apply a massive amount of pressure while dissolving the oxygen using microbubbles, and send the processed seawater back out. It kind of sounds like the oxygen would separate out and escape as soon as it returned to normal pressure, but I guess the hypoxic Sea of Death does the most damage in the deep sea pits. The pressure is already high there, so maybe it isn't a problem."

But why were they so interested in altering the water quality?

Why would their military be interested in it?

Frolaytia had the answer.

"The Capitalist Corporations apparently want to revive the treasure trove of valuable fish around here. Most importantly, the sharks. Shark fin is a valuable ingredient and used for makeup foundation, so it can be sold as a luxury product."

"..."

"..."

They had already seen this information in the email they were sent, but they did not look exactly pleased about the reminder.

"You mean they're intentionally increasing the shark population for profit? Are you kidding me? Not even the protective nets are perfect. Do you know how many surfers were eaten this summer alone?"

Heivia sounded disgusted, but Frolaytia remained somehow apathetic.

"Tourist locations with travelers from every world power are always a spy paradise. That isn't great news for the Capitalist Corporations who want absolute control over the Hawaii District, so they want to change things. Although they need to show how doing so will also make money if they want approval."

"So they're making money off of their own vague conspiracy? Aren't they afraid of hackers?"

"It doesn't matter to them if they're found out. They just want all the tourists to leave. And if they spread a fear of shark attacks, it should enliven the insurance industry. We might even see a boom for cheap disaster B-movies."

They would always find a way to keep the cash flowing.

And of course, the Legitimacy Kingdom wanted to put a stop to this. They wanted Hawaii to be full of tourists to maintain the spy paradise there. They did not want their binoculars to show all that bikini-clad flesh being chewed to pieces. Quenser did not know how to use a gun properly, but that may have been why he groaned in a know-it-all way for no real reason.

He shrugged in a way that was unusual for him.

"But isn't that what the leased weapons are for? To hunt down the sharks! Is our coastguard doing that badly?"

"Hard to say. For one thing, it isn't sharks they're fighting."

Frolaytia started down a mysterious digression.

They had not heard this part of the story.

"Now that they have more firepower, they seem to have started targeting the air pumps causing all the trouble. Those things use tons of pressure to process tens of thousands of liters every minute. So unless that oxygen supply is stopped, the shark population will only continue to grow."

"Ugh."

"This is what happens when you give an idiot nothing but a tool. And it's the problem with the lend-lease program. They attacked the Capitalist Corporations base with nothing but some old machineguns that were close to breaking down. And that-..."

Frolaytia Capistrano was cut off by a loud boom.

It sounded a lot like a nearby tree being split in two by lightning and the strange 200m destroyer battleship shook vertically.

It was not that anything had hit them. The ship had only been shaken by the waves created as a side effect.

Frolaytia placed a hand on the wall.

"And that woke a sleeping tiger: the Capitalist Corporations' Second Generation Over Cavitation. Our Baby Magnum is currently going on a diet to shave off the excess pounds."

Frolaytia audibly dumped the contents of her kiseru into an ashtray.

That meant she would explain the rest in the conference room.

With the two idiots in tow, the busty silver-haired commander threw open the large double doors and made an immediate announcement.

"Everyone! We are running out of time, so I will keep this short. Make sure you're ready to fight some sharks!"

She used the projector to display a map of the Hawaiian Islands and the surrounding ocean.

"Currently, the Princess and the Over Cavitation are engaged in a naval battle, but you don't need the details on that. Sending a bunch of idiots in won't help her any. Your lives will be used for something a little more useful, so be thankful in your own idiotic way."

She set that topic aside as readily as a cooking show stepping over and pulling out a version of the dish that had been allowed to sit for 30 minutes.

The Princess really must have been short on time.

"Based on our analysis of past battles, the Over Cavitation is quite skilled. But at the same time, it has an odd tendency to only fight when it has plenty of weather and ocean data support. That's the kind of demand it can only make because it's won so often, but it also gives us a target."

With a sound like an analog camera shutter, another image appeared on top of the map. There were now Xs across Hawaii's 8 main islands.

"The Hawaii District is a disaster-prone area thanks to its several active volcanos and the more than 30 hurricanes that hit every year. That means it has plenty of weather stations and ocean observation stations. It's the perfect place to provide the glasses that the ace Over Cavitation desires."

To finish it off, Frolaytia tapped an extra-large X with her long, narrow kiseru.

"This is the Rocky Coast Ocean Meteorological Research Lab. All the data is gathered here and then sent to the Over Cavitation. Taking out this lab will shake that Object. And if we shake it, the Princess will have a chance for a cross counter."

Part 3

The Princess was already in the ring.

They had to give their cute kitten a chance to strike back before she collapsed, could not get back up on all fours, and started convulsing with her little butt sticking up in the air.

The Rocky Coast Ocean Meteorological Research Lab was located on the coast of Oahu near some sheer cliffs. It was located there to help look after the “tropical fish tank pumps”, so approaching from the ocean by motorboat would be fastest. However...

“Watch out!”

The rubber boat was tossed around by the loud boom, the shockwave, and the waves. The red and orange anemone pattern on the bottom of the boat came into view. The boat could entirely capsize at any time, but they could not afford to forget that the Capitalist Corporations VIPs were raising tons of sharks here to profit off the luxury ingredients.

“It’s no use! That catfight is causing too much chaos! We should take a land route, even if it’s a bit of a detour!!”

“Dammit, but we can see the landing point right over there...”

They were not paid nearly enough to make an emotional charge, get thrown out into the ocean, get chomped by 8m great whites, and have a movie made out of their lives that would get popcorn tubs thrown at the screen. The potatoes were lacking in a spirit of loyalty and service, so they changed course and made their way to an area of coast shaped like a knife blade.

“Where are we anyway? ...Oh, hell! This is easily 8km away!! The current dragged us on way too much of a detour!!”

“Once we walk those 8km, it’s time for combat. But this isn’t a battlefield country, so are you really brave enough to shoot them?”

“Oh, shut up. They’re equipped with rifles and grenades more expensive than ours and they’re selling secrets to the Capitalist Corporations, so they don’t get to claim they’re civilians.”

“Maybe not, but could you say that if it turns out we’re up against some cute girl who’s down on her luck?”

They could already see the Object battle from the coast.

One of them was the Baby Magnum.

An extra naval float was attached to the static electricity propulsion device shaped like an upside-down Y and the 7 weapon arms attached to the back of the giant spherical body held the main cannons which aimed for its target from multiple angles.

The other was the Over Cavitation.

This one was built exclusively for naval battles. The float stretching back from below the spherical body was a specialized air cushion. It omitted the usual shark anchor weights used to maintain balance, but that may have been for its nimble footwork. It could not move over land despite floating up from the surface, but that was apparently because it used salinity to make minute adjustments to the air's viscosity. It also had several metal pipes spread out on either side like wings. The world looked somewhat hazy, so it may have been sucking up the seawater and converting it to vapor with the immense heat produced by its reactor. That steam power was used to slide the 200,000-ton mass side to side.

It had a single main cannon on the front.

Two bipod-like parts extended to the ocean surface from the base of the cannon, so they likely supported its long barrel. It also seemed to have laser beams and low-stability plasma cannons as secondary cannons, but instead of covering the sphere like a sea urchin or chestnut burr, three specialized towers were built on the top and the secondary cannons were installed on them. Had they needed to shift those parts elsewhere to surround the entire Object in water and steam, or had they been worried the steam would slightly divert the lasers and plasma if they were not that high up?

"That's insane," groaned Heivia as he viewed the distant fight. "Those are steam spears. It's using that stuff to attack. An Object's onion armor can survive a nuke, but that's a steam engine! How is our Princess being shredded by that steampunk stuff!?"

"It's not just slicing through with the steam pressure. It uses cavitation, Heivia."

Cavitation used the same process by which the air bubbles in the water applied pressure to and ultimately destroyed a ship's propeller. And when using that as an attack, you needed a fuse of water to get all those small air bubbles to the target.

"Cavitation can be created by quickly passing a large mass through the water, but it can also be created by sending out a supersonic wave to raise the sound pressure. I'm betting this Object fires a water spear and sends a supersonic wave through that to transform it into a bunch of air bubbles. From there, Bernoulli's principle hits the target with the water attack."

"Calm down your science boner and actually explain it this time."

"It's a 10km-long pile driver. Or you can think of it like a giant battering ram meant to break through a castle's gate."

The Over Cavitation transformed the water itself into a weapon that stripped away the Baby Magnum's armor.

It was frustrating, but cheering on the Princess from the stands would not transfer her some miracle power for a mysterious awakening.

"Let's get going, Heivia. We have a job to do."

"What do you think we can even do? Jerk off and go to bed!?"

"Heivia."

"At least tell me who I'm allowed to kill!! Can I just slaughter everyone in that lab!?"

That was not an option, so they had Mr. Drone do some recon. They received the report from Thomas, who operated the same model of drone that had helped them at the Eastern European monastery hotel.

"Found it. There are flashing IR signals. You can't see them with the naked eye, but they have markers on their right arms to make sure the Object doesn't blow them away by accident. Those are official military equipment, so whether they're wearing camouflage, a Hawaiian shirt, or nothing at all, these are definitely Capitalist Corporations soldiers."

"Are you sure they aren't lent out like our scraps?"

"They're using a Class 3 military standard, so the company president or whoever must be afraid of the signal's encryption being broken. They updated to this latest version only two weeks ago and they're careful to retrieve the devices from dead soldiers along with the dog tags, so there's no chance they released them on a lend-lease program. We're not talking about a disk of porn; you won't find these on the shelves in their private viewing booths."

That settled it, but infrared signals were invisible. If anyone got some footage of the aftermath, it would be tagged "horrific slaughter" and uploaded to video sites to harass the Legitimacy Kingdom, so even though they knew who their target was, they wanted more obvious justification before entering "kill everyone" mode.

And this aerial vantage point let them view the distribution of enemy troops before the fighting began. The Ocean Meteorological Research Lab was surrounded by guards wearing ghillie suits despite the heat and carrying a type of bolt-action sniper rifle that had started out as a hunting rifle before making its military debut, but the wider wilderness around them looked peaceful. The smaller

heat signals they detected were likely wild animals. The long-range sniper rifles were probably a way of covering as wide an area as possible with limited personnel.

In that case...

"Be on the lookout for mines just to be safe. Sniper rifles like that are weak to a charge from a unified group of people. They generally try to stop people and then shoot them. If they don't have any barricades set up, they might have something buried in the dirt."

"You're kidding, right? This is a tourist area."

Quenser heard a plastic clasp clicking into place.

Heivia had attached something to the end of his assault rifle. Its shape was very different from a bayonet. The round part was similar to the kind of simple metal detector used by the bouncer at a club.

"This is a blank area, so it technically isn't a safe country. Neutrality isn't always a good thing. It isn't clear which of the four world powers makes the rules here, so there are no definite rules in place and they're free to do whatever they want."

But then Thomas interrupted again.

"Wait, wait. We can attach the mine detector to the Vehicle."

"The Vehicle?"

"The land drone. You can think of it like an RC car you can control from really far away." Thomas seemed a little overexcited. "The mine detector isn't perfect. It won't detect glass or plastic mines, so let's have this thing go on ahead. If it detects the mine, we know it's there. If it misses one, only the toy gets blown up."

"You're sounding awfully Information Alliance-y to me."

"If your knight's honor matters that much to you, then you can ride on ahead on a white horse. We need to absorb the good points of the other powers. There's nothing sadder than a giant who can't keep up with the changing times. Weapons these days are all IoT, so-..."

They heard a bang from up ahead.

It came from a mere 5m away. Thomas took a shot to the temple and collapsed to the side. It

happened so suddenly that the two idiots only stood and watched.

Also, what was that?

What had just happened!?

“That was a gunshot.”

“But from where!?”

Heivia held out his unwieldy assault rifle with mine detector still attached, but his aim wavered uncertainly.

They were on a section of the coast that jutted out like a knife and it gradually sloped upwards on the way to the lab. There were a lot of rough boulders lying around, but there was nothing close enough for the 5m distance of the sound they heard. Only a few smaller rocks. Also, Thomas had sent out a drone and observed everything from the sky before he was killed. Even if someone was hiding behind cover, they should have been visible when viewed from above.

(Is there something buried here? Not an explosive, but a remote handgun that swivels like a fan?)

Something moved behind one of the smallish rocks.

No.

There was definitely something there!

“Is it a drone!? Dammit, what is going on!?”

“We can figure everything out after destroying it!!”

Quenser felt just as disgusted as he would have been if he found a colorful bug larger than a slipper. He cut off a decent-sized piece of plastic explosive, stabbed an electric fuse into it, and wrapped a hard zip tie around it. Detonating that would scatter pieces of the zip tie like shrapnel.

However...

“Ahh!?”

Heivia yelled when he used the assault rifle’s scope to see and circled around to get a view of the

assassin hidden behind the rock.

This was yet another thing technology had sent to the battlefield.

It was a monkey.

The 60cm monkey was...holding a handgun with an oddly large chamber that had probably been made with a 3D printer?

It gave a short screech of warning.

No matter who or what was holding it, a gun was a gun.

Before the monkey could move its finger, Heivia fired a short burst of gunfire into the center of its body.

“Is this a joke!?”

The atmosphere had changed.

Had they even fully accepted that their comrade had been killed?

More and more monkeys appeared from behind rocks and on branches to aim identical printed guns their way.

“Are you kidding me!? Thomas lost his life to this!?”

They did not have time to sit around complaining.

There were more than 100 of the monkeys and they were all armed with real guns. Quenser threw his handmade grenade made from a plastic explosive and quickly sent the detonation signal via radio. He was not even thinking about wiping out the monkeys. He just wanted some cover to hide behind and use as a shield.

A temporary smokescreen was good enough for now.

After breaking free of that situation, Quenser and the others hurried to the thick tree trunks in the area. The soldiers that were not going to make it in time jumped toward the coastal cliff instead.

“Heivia, above!!”

“Goddammit!!”

Heivia aimed his assault rifle up like he was firing a salute or a warning shot and he brought down the monkeys in the branches to secure their safety.

“This isn’t an easy job at all. I thought our job was to safely bring the Over Cavitation to a stop!”

Some other cheap gunshots rang out.

Luckily, the monkeys’ guns used light 9mm rounds. They probably could not endure the recoil of anything more powerful than that. The tree trunks could block those bullets.

“So what is this? What in the hell is this!? What is happening here!?”

“The enemy must have given them these weapons.”

“They gave animals guns to shoot at us!? Isn’t that a bit nightmarish for a fairy tale!?”

“I remember seeing an online news article about a monkey picking up a camera someone left in the woods, messing around with it, and eventually taking selfies.”

“What’s that got to do with-...wait.”

“They can aim a camera at something and take a picture. Aiming a gun and pulling the trigger isn’t much different. With a bit of training, you can get them shooting. Those printed guns are generally disposable, so they don’t need to think about anything complicated like taking them apart for maintenance.”

“But they’re monkeys!”

“Using animals as weapons doesn’t violate the war treaties. Everyone’s familiar with military dogs, right? It depends on the exact conditions, but if they don’t have a semiconductor plant, they might be able to mass produce these faster than plastic and rare earth drones. They probably made sure to choose a non-protected species. I remember hearing about hundreds of thousands of monkeys being experimented on for neuroscience research, so there’s definitely a loophole there!”

The biggest advantage of guns was that they gave everyone the same ability to kill or wound. Even if it was a nonhuman creature that was only taught to pull the trigger without understanding the actual meaning behind it.

“How many times do I have to remind you these are animals!? How am I supposed to believe this,

Quenser!?”

“If you’re just repeating the same thing, it means you’ve stopped thinking, Heivia. We don’t have time to deny reality. We can think about what to do next after we deal with these monkeys to secure our safety!”

Heivia and Quenser started moving while coordinating with the other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes pressing against the other trees.

They were lucky in one way.

There were a lot of monkeys, but their cheap, 3D-printed guns only fired weak 9mm bullets. This was clearly designed to get some lucky shots in but not achieve a definitive victory. It was quantity or quality. Thomas had been taken out from 5m away, so they probably could not hit unless they got really close.

Meanwhile, Heivia and the others were equipped with sensor-enhanced assault rifles with an effective range of 400-500 meters against a moving target.

They opened fire.

Once they were aware of the threat, this was how it went down.

Also, dead Thomas’s drone detected the monkeys’ movements just fine. He had only overlooked them because he assumed only humans were a threat. They had been right in front of him, but he had failed to see them. It was another form of camouflage.

But now the soldiers understood.

They had updated their definition of “enemy”.

Heivia, Myonri, and the rest used the trees as shields and fired their standard equipment to swiftly eliminate the threat.

“What’s next!? Bring on the Woodpecker Unit or the Otter Squad!! Attention all tool-using animals, the exterminator has arrived!!”

“Is this really official Capitalist Corporations equipment? Setting aside how easy it is to get the animals to reproduce, the guns they’re using are too cheap. I’ve never heard of soldiers going to battle with printed guns.”

They had a bad feeling about this.

One problem remained unresolved after the incident in the Transylvania District: the arms dealer.

“Is that mystery dealer sending weapons to the Capitalist Corporations like we’re lending weapons to the coastguard? We’re not trying to wage a drug war here!”

“This is turning into a proxy war like kids getting rhino beetle to fight each other. Who are we benefitting as we grab at each other’s hair like this?”

The advantage of numbers was not enough, so there was no fear of being defeated once the surprise wore off. It was the same idea as quantity over quality. A female soldier everyone called “mom” (age 17) woke everyone up by scattering the monkeys with a full-auto blast of a light machinegun. Then everything changed. The gun-wielding monkeys started to flee, but Heivia and the others mercilessly shot them in the back. They were enemies as long as they held those guns. If the monkeys got away, they could attack from a ditch, a roof, or a tree hollow at any moment.

These were not humans.

If the enemy was using that to their advantage, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes would use it against them as well.

Then some bark burst from the tree Quenser was hiding behind. He ducked his head down on reflex. That had not been a cheap 9mm round from one of the printed guns. It was heavier.

“Snipers!!” shouted Heivia. “That one was a human. The lab guards are targeting us, but we can’t reach them from here!! Dammit, why do I always get the short end of the stick? Well, I’m not dying until I get a chance to see that legendary maid!!”

“Please don’t talk about that right now!!”

“?”

“Anyway, Heivia, hand over what Thomas left behind. Machines are my specialty, so I’ll make that drone more deadly.”

That was a simple task.

He did not even need to attach a bomb that would only unbalance it. To keep it airborne for long periods of time, the military drone used a large lithium ion battery and it only took a bit of reworking to make one of those explode. Once it was ready, he sent the drone high in the sky. Then he used it to spy down on the enemy, flew it over their heads, and stopped the motor to drop it right on top of

them.

In this case, it did not matter if the snipers shot it down.

The conservation of mass was absolute. Even as wreckage, the explosive would reach the ground.

After detonating it with his radio, they only had to eliminate the scattered snipers.

The snipers' ghillie suits made from dried grass and palm bark proved to be a mistake. The explosion ignited them and the snipers went up in flames.

"Wow, look at them dance. Why not get to shooting them, Heivia?"

"No, that just sounds like a pain. And it scares me how you can spy on them and then attack them from above even though they're hiding behind cover. I feel like we've reached the end of 2D battles."

"It's not as convenient as it sounds. They're developing countermeasures that let airport security use jamming signals or powerful IR signals to take control of the drone and force it to land. It's also possible a cyber attack could turn it around and have it attack us instead."

They heard gunshots coming from the human fireballs. Either the spare ammo in their pouches was going off, or they had gathered their last ounce of strength to draw a handgun and shoot themselves in the head. With the snipers gone, there was nothing to stop the potatoes. They did not even need to hide behind cover. They walked toward the Rocky Coast Ocean Meteorological Research Lab while occasionally using their assault rifles to take out the few remaining monkeys.

"They'll know something's up. Watch out for a jack-in-the-box cause you never know when something will pop out of that hive of intellectuals. We're talking about the Over Cavitation's favorites after all."

But whether there would be traps, an ambush, or a mysterious superweapon from an ancient civilization, Quenser and the others did not have any tanks or armored trucks to shield them and all the cover on the ground was only large enough for the monkeys. They settled on spreading out as much as they could to make sure they were not all wiped out at once by a spray of bullets or an explosion.

"I hope our lives are still more valuable than some plastic toys and pet shop rejects."

"Whatever the case, our lives are more valuable than theirs. It's time for a year-end sale."

The lab in question was on a cape-like point of the coast. Reaching it from the cliff would have been easy, but that had not been an option. They had been forced the long way around with the Princess's

battle stirring up the ocean so much.

As they approached through the human, animal, and drone remains littering the ground, they came across what looked more like a prison than anything. There were barbed wire barricades taller than they were, a double wall of reinforced concrete, and guard towers at each corner. None of it looked like later additions. Whatever it was officially registered as, this place had been constructed to military standards from the beginning.

“What do we do?”

“Send out a radio signal. If they don’t respond, that counts as hostile intent and we wipe them out. Our goal here is to trip up their Object, so let’s get back at those intellectuals and their Over Cavitation.”

“Will anyone but Martians even be able to receive a signal on this core band?”

This was how war worked when you were winning. There were no snipers in the guard towers, so they may have retreated inside. There were heavy machineguns that swiveled without anyone manning them, so they had jack-of-all-trades Myonri switch to an anti-materiel rifle to silence them. After that, they sliced through the barbed wire with a large knife, continued on in, and approached the reinforced concrete walls.

“Myonri, take out the cameras around here and then knock on the front door.”

“This can’t punch through that steel gate.”

“You only need to warn them to keep clear.”

They knew the layout thanks to the aerial drone footage, so they decided to go for the building closest to the wall. While Myonri knocked on the giant main gate with her anti-materiel rifle, Quenser set up a plastic explosive.

“Myonri, match your timing to mine!”

With a ridiculously loud explosion, they blew down the wall. They used the large hole to walk a few meters inside and then attached a bomb to the building wall there.

“While you’re at it, destroy the switchboard on the courtyard-facing wall to take out the security. We’re counting on you!”

“Sure, sure,” replied Myonri.

A loud gunshot joined the next blast.

None of the building's cameras or sensors were working anymore, so the potatoes snuck into a hallway which lacked air conditioning now that the power was out.

Once inside, Quenser hung back to let Heivia and the others take the lead. Myonri also switched back to her submachinegun.

At first glance, there was no one there.

But this was not like a school at night. They sensed the strange pressure of people holding their breath and waiting.

"Watch out for an ambush."

"We don't necessarily need to kill everyone, Heivia. Focus on taking out the weather and ocean data support to shake the Over Cavitation."

"Do you want to get shot in the back because you decided to go easy on them? Getting killed by some skinny researcher is even worse than by your own pet. Do you want that written on your gravestone?"

According to the map on the wall, there was a large boiler room in the basement. If they set up a bomb there, they could probably blow up the entire facility.

They heard a heavy metallic scraping sound coming from around the corner to the stairs leading down there.

Heivia aimed his assault rifle that way and Quenser cut off a grenade-sized piece of plastic explosive just to be safe.

They first focused on the floor at the corner.

That floor reflected the light and they glimpsed a blurry figure in that reflection.

That settled it.

There was someone there.

But they still were not sure how that person was equipped or if they were alone.

“ ... ”

Heivia took the lead with his assault rifle. Myonri followed a short distance behind with her submachinegun. It might seem harsh, but this formation allowed her to swiftly eliminate the enemy if Heivia was shot.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

Heivia came to a stop just before reaching the corner. He pressed against the wall so he could freely swing his gun around.

He was prepared to eliminate the threat in the blink of an eye.

But that was when Quenser noticed something on the wall at the corner. He saw something reflected in the window which had a thick wire mesh across to keep anyone from getting in or out.

He threw his ball of clay at Heivia's temple while that boy readied his assault rifle in 120% serious mode.

“Wait, Heivia, you idiot!!”

“Bgwah!?”

He had expected it to be light, but it was apparently quite heavy. Heivia collapsed to the floor like someone had swung a bag of apples at his head.

Myonri's eyes widened.

“Quenser, are you finally sick of how he treats you!?”

“He framed me when he was caught searching for porn on a military computer! When I kill him, you can expect a much more devious plan! Anyway, everyone needs to wait!!”

After shouting and having them lower their guns, Quenser peered around the corner.

A brown-skinned girl of about 12 was sitting on the floor with tears in her eyes.

And a grapefruit-sized metal ball was chained to her skinny ankle.

Part 4

Things could hardly be worse.

The girl wore a Hawaiian shirt and a tennis-style pleated skirt. She had a hibiscus flower decorating her semi-long black hair and a straw skirt accessory worn over her actual skirt. The overall outfit provided a tropical mood, but the tears in her eyes and metal ball chained to her ankle filled the air around her with a gloomy weight.

“Uuh...”

“Excuse me. I just want to take a look.”

Quenser crouched down to her eye level and reached toward her slender ankle while she remained sitting on the floor. He could just about see her underwear up her short skirt, but she held the skirt down with one hand while he touched her warm and slender ankle.

He was interested in the shackle.

Even this much was progress. She gave a shrill cry whenever Myonri or the others approached. The armed potatoes may have looked like a gang of villains to her. Given what had happened, that was not too surprising, but she seemed to view Quenser differently since he had hit and silenced Heivia before the boy reached her.

Quenser felt a little guilty when he realized it was a lot like the good cop, bad cop routine.

“It’s a lot lighter than it looks. It’s a capsule made of aircraft materials. Does it have a GPS transmitter inside?”

Speaking loudly or looking down at her from above seemed to scare the brown girl, so Myonri made sure to be careful when she spoke up.

“Is this what they use to monitor sex criminals? Why are they using that to track a young girl like this? ...Wait, but aren’t those attached to the ankle with a belt? That way you can hide it in your pants leg and live a normal life.”

“They’ve intentionally designed this one to eliminate the wearer’s dignity. Is this what the Capitalist Corporations does with all its cash?”

But unlike a narrow wire, they could not cut through this with a knife and their guns and bombs were too powerful. They had plenty of special tools back at the maintenance base zone, but...

"Lady, do you mind if I take a look at this?"

"No...go ahead."

Quenser borrowed the ID on the girl's flat chest.

It had a sticker of a cartoonish man carrying a fishing pole with the sun in the background. It may have been some kind of local mascot.

"Hina Liqueurball? I'm not familiar with that last name."

"If she isn't from the four world powers, is she a local Hawaiian girl?"

"But this ID is for a researcher at Kilauea University with a student loan. Hm? That's odd."

She was 12 years old, but Quenser had seen plenty of students who skipped grades back in his safe country school. It sounded like something from movies or dramas, but it did actually happen. However, it was something else he found odd. Why did the ID need to specify that she had taken out a student loan? He could only guess that was a Capitalist Corporations thing. This showed how they viewed people who had no money and had to borrow money to get by. That would also be why she had to wear the humiliating shackle designed so she could not hide it.

The Capitalist Corporations had effective control over Hawaii.

That was an unofficial thing and it was not actually registered that way, but the Over Cavitation was already acting like it owned the place.

Quenser looked up toward heaven.

"I think I get it. Their major corporations and investors are recruiting talented people, trapping them here with student loans, and promising to pay off the loan if the students work for them. That's what's happening here. This lab is near the front line, so they man it with those indebted students."

That must have been entirely normal here because brown-skinned Hina only tilted her head. Myonri felt a chill when she realized what they had nearly done.

"They're all innocent students. I'm glad we didn't carelessly shoot any of them. Good work, Quenser."

"Please, please. That's not nearly enough praise."

By the way, after being hit in the temple by Quenser's "good work", Heivia remained collapsed in the hallway while convulsing a bit, but no one was paying any attention to him.

"Lady, were the people with scary guns friends of yours?"

"No, I don't know them. They came from the army."

Quenser had suspected as much, but the confirmation was still a relief.

Even if those snipers had opened fire first, they had still been burned alive in their ghillie suits. Sleep would have been hard to come by if it turned out those were civilians.

Those snipers had been professional soldiers. Since Hina had not been supplied with anything to protect herself, the Capitalist Corporations military must not have trusted her or the other indebted locals. Those locals had plenty of reason to hold a grudge, so the soldiers had been afraid to give them guns.

Quenser was thankful for that.

That gave them a convenient way to tell who they could kill and who they had to keep alive. If the civilians had been forced into some kind of combat training, the distinction would have been a lot harder to make.

"So are all the researchers like this?" wondered Quenser. "We need to evacuate them before blowing the place up."

"Um, do you think they'll actually listen to us at this point?" asked Myonri. "We did break into the place looking ready to kill everything that moved."

"Here, take a look at this."

"What?"

Quenser showed her the colored ball launcher he found alongside the axe in the emergency box on the wall. It used compressed carbon dioxide gas to fire those things found next to convenience store registers. It was shaped a lot like a single-shot grenade launcher.

"I'll mess with its power output so it will knock people out. The rest of you create projectiles by stuffing socks or stockings full of rice or flour. Make them the same size as these colored balls. If

you can't find any grains, you can use the stuffing of a beanbag or pillow, but don't use any kind of metal balls. Those will kill someone."

"Um."

"If they refuse to listen, just knock them out like Heivia over there and drag them outside. We don't have much time. If we don't do something, the Princess will lose to the Over Cavitation. Don't aim for the face because you take an eye out. Also make sure they aren't near anything they could hit their head on like a desk corner or a protrusion on the floor."

"Wow, you definitely don't put the 'gentle' in gentleman, do you?"

The potatoes could be a little too passionate about ditching work and getting sidetracked, but they could still get the job done once they had a clear goal in mind. Quenser started by making five of the modified launchers.

"Heivia, wake up. It's work time."

"Ugh, what happened?"

"A nightmarish superweapon showed up and we were facing certain doom, but my courageous actions saved us all. You can use this, so make sure to pay me back for my moving heroics."

After Quenser made up a story and gave the other boy a launcher, they cleaned up the facility with Hina Liqueurball in tow.

"Squeeze."

"Excuse me, lady."

Quenser had a simple reason for grabbing Hina's small head with one hand and having her press against the side of his hips: her Hawaiian shirt was pretty baggy, so when there was space between them, looking down at her would have given him a tunnel-like view of her undeveloped chest. He had needed to prevent that somehow.

The launchers were never put to use. It was over before they could even think about firing. As soon as the red laser pointer dot reached them, the chocolate-colored researchers (no, given Hina's circumstances, they may have been indebted students as well) shrieked and put their hands up. Some of them were carrying a cat or a birdcage. They were generally harmless, so the potatoes felt bad doing this even though it was necessary.

They also spotted the occasional squid and eel mascot character that may have come from a local

legend, but that was all. There were no cruel tricks like a grenade on the doorknob.

"Damn, there's a lot of them!" said Heivia. "Does this lab have bus service? If not, we can't bring them all back with us!!"

"Why would we bring them back with us, you idiot?" replied Quenser. "Once they're outside, they can get back to their own homes. Unlike us, they aren't being targeted by the Capitalist Corporations."

"What about their GPS signals?" asked Myonri. "I'd prefer they weren't advertising their location while they're with us."

"Lead is the all-time champion when it comes to blocking signals," said Quenser. "This uses microwaves just like a cellphone, right? Then we can block it with a fine wire mesh like they use in microwave doors."

A couple of gunshots rang out.

This was not from the nonlethal launcher Quenser had given them. Heivia clicked his tongue with a large military handgun in his other hand.

"Someone else stole a Hawaiian shirt from a locker to hide among the researchers. Check out the tattoo on his arm. He's from White Harpoon, an elite naval PMC. But he was obviously a fake since he didn't have the ball-and-chain on his ankle. That's what you get for lying, buddy."

"Hey, couldn't you have used the launcher?" asked Quenser. "You just cratered all the good will we'd been gradually building up."

"Was he the last one?" asked Myonri. "I found this high-quality thermal sensor in here. It's meant to read the water temperature, but it interfaces with my gun's multipurpose sight just fine and it isn't showing any other heat signatures."

"We can have them do a roll call. But if anyone is hiding their thermal signature behind a special shield, we know they're not a civilian. And who cares if some professional soldiers were late to evacuate and get killed. Sounds win-win to me."

"We're never getting that good will back, are we?"

Quenser sounded exasperated while Hina tearfully clung to his hips like she was hugging a giant stuffed animal after having a nightmare. He could feel her somewhat high body temperature and a faint sweet aroma coming from her black hair tickled at his nose. The more the others scared her, the more she felt she could only rely on Potato #1.

During all this, they had set up the bomb on the boiler in the basement and Quenser contacted someone with his radio.

“Aloha. How you doing, Princess? It looks like you’re being carved up a fair bit, but it’s not at the level of a gore video yet, is it?”

“Hurry up. I feel like I’ve lost 2 kilos from the tension alone.”

“Ha ha ha. So you’re a kilo away from getting down to your original weight?”

A powerful blast stabbed into the ocean nowhere near the enemy.

“Hold on, don’t draw the enemy’s attention this way!!”

“I have not gained weight. I know how to manage my health.”

“I bet it’s all that coconut milk. Maybe you should rethink having a fridge in the cockpit. Anyway, we’ve secured the lab, so we can stop the transfer of weather and ocean data at any time. I’ll leave the detonation timing to you, so tell us when to trip up the Over Cavitation.”

Quenser gestured for the others to leave the lab.

“Start the countdown at 30 seconds,” said the Princess.

“Will do. If things change, feel free to cancel the countdown and start over. Don’t do anything dumb because you feel bound by the time you set.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?”

“The person who’s losing and having her dress shredded. Okay, begin the countdown.”

Fortunately, they did not need to redo it.

It was the Baby Magnum vs. the Over Cavitation.

After walking outside the reinforced concrete wall and looking to the ocean, Quenser heard the end of the countdown.

“3, 2, 1.”

“Zero.”

An explosion burst up from the ground behind him and the prison-like research facility collapsed.

Part 5

The change was readily apparent from the Baby Magnum’s cockpit.

The Over Cavitation had been moving side to side so much before, but now it caught a bit like the needle skipping on a record.

(I can do this.)

The weapons system got to work when the lasers in the Princess’s goggles read the movements of her eyes. To maintain her extreme focus, she reached for a drink bottle with a straw sticking out from it. She regretted it when she tasted the sweetness of that first sip. Quenser’s words had pierced the teenage girl’s ultra-sensitive heart, but she could not spit out the coconut milk now.

“Princess, the Over Cavitation uses an aircushion to stay afloat, but that means the status of the waves influences the layer of air. It also uses the salinity of the air to create a kind of ‘stickiness’, so it should be restricted to naval battles only. It probably uses its data support to receive accurate information on those factors.”

At any rate, the Princess’s widened eyes focused accurately on her target. She selected the appropriate weapon and 7 low-stability plasma cannons accurately locked onto the Over Cavitation now that its movement had been slightly disturbed by the lack of data support.

She would not miss now.

A cross counter was fine. The battle would end here, so taking more damage was not a real problem as long as it was not critical.

Defeating the enemy took priority.

(I will end this here!!)

And.

And.

And.

A “leg” appeared out of nowhere, kicked at the water...and launched it sideways???

“Huh?”

The Princess was dumbfounded after she fired the 7 main cannons. This was supposed to be a sure thing, but the enemy Object suddenly hopped to her right and escaped the 7 beams fanned out over the expected range of its evasive actions.

It was the main cannon.

Or more accurately, the two bipod-like parts at the base. One of those had extended like a police baton and suddenly kicked the ocean surface.

The steam pipes spread out like wings and the very edge of the spherical body had their onion armor shaved away with an orange light, but that was all. The Over Cavitation could still move. It aimed her way with the long white spear of a main cannon created by combining water vapor and air bubbles.

(It didn't work.)

The Princess tried to force her Object into evasive actions of its own, but the machine could not keep up with the rapid back and forth movements she was demanding of it. It groaned like a settling house and inertia squeezed at the organs inside her slender body.

What was that “leg”?

No one had told her about that!

Part 6

The Over Cavitation had unleashed a merciless attack.

Quenser was as shocked as anyone as he watched from the coast.

“Are you kidding me?”

His trembling hand reached for his radio.

“Are you kidding me, Frolaytia!? This isn't what we were told! We did what we were supposed to and so did the Princess. So were you planning to have a good laugh while we died because you kept secrets from us!?”

"We don't know what this is either!! None of the records of previous battles include this propulsion device. This was a troublesome enough Second Generation already, but it looks like it was modernized at some point!!"

"What happened to the Princess?"

"She took a main cannon hit but just barely managed to avoid complete destruction. Frankly, it's a miracle she's managing to stay afloat and keep fighting."

"..."

Complaining was not going to help.

No matter how unfair it was, they had to accept the reality before their eyes and figure out what was going on or else they would be slaughtered without accomplishing a thing.

This new equipment was not a part of the Capitalist Corporations' official specs. So what outside entity could have supplied a propulsion device from a completely different line of technology?

"The arms dealer," said Quenser.

"Huh?" said Heivia. "You mean the one from Eastern Europe?"

"They're learning!! It takes years to build a whole Object, but a single part reduces the cost and time by a considerable amount. The incident at the monastery hotel came to light ahead of time because it took too much time and effort, but this method keeps the watchful eyes of international society from keeping up!!"

"B-but a Capitalist Corporations Object belongs to the Capitalist Corporations, right?" said Myonri. "Wouldn't they just use the arms dealer for as long as it took to complete the modernization and then arrest them?"

"What if the arms dealer is the only one who can maintain and supply spare parts for something as crucial as the Object's propulsion device or main cannon? The Over Cavitation would only have struck a deal with such a suspicious figure if it had a complex about something. They were told this would improve and strengthen the Object, but the arms dealer was essentially hijacking it. The Capitalist Corporations can't just get rid of them if they're needed to keep the Object running. Once they've worked their way deep enough into the system, they'll become a criminal organization with official protection!!"

That may have mattered more than the Object deal itself. It was like threatening the executives of an above-the-board corporation and turning it into a front for a criminal organization.

"What do we do, Quenser!? This is all for nothing if the Princess is taken out. We'll lose our trump card!!"

"I know that!"

Right now, he wanted accurate information about the Over Cavitation's undercarriage and new propulsion device. But the damaged Princess would not last long enough for a complete analysis made from observations during the battle.

He needed a shortcut.

And he had an idea.

"We find the arms dealer hidden in the Hawaii District. That way we can steal their plans for the propulsion device they're using to protect themselves!!"

Part 7

Quenser and the others had originally planned to approach by sea in rubber motorboats. That meant they had no land vehicles. They ended up hopping into the back of the military truck Frolaytia must have arranged after being informed of the situation. The rude cowards driving the trucks had refused to approach until the threat was gone.

"Hey, do we even know the arms dealer is here? You can buy anything online these days, so they might be relaxing on the other side of the globe."

"They're keeping themselves safe by keeping the secrets of the new propulsion device to themselves. They wouldn't hand the plans or manual to anyone else. They'll be on the scene to boss around the maintenance soldiers while never letting them see the whole picture."

"And why is that Hina girl still clinging to you?"

"Wow! When did you sneak in here, lady? The other truck will take you home!"

That belated instruction was meaningless because the truck headed to Oahu's urban area had already left. It was too late to change trucks now.

"Que'ser."

Also, Hina Liqueurball puffed out her cheeks, clung to him like he was a giant stuffed animal, and made no attempt to move. He could sense her high body temperature and faint sweet scent. She must have picked up on his name from the conversations she overheard and she said it with bit of an

accented pronunciation. This was looking more like Stockholm syndrome than popularity with the ladies. The soldiers spoke up in annoyance because they did not like being used as the bad guys in that scenario.

“Make sure you look after her yourself.”

“If a stray bullet flies her way, you had better take it for her. Let Hina die after all this and all four world powers will hunt you down.”

“What are you people expecting of a battlefield student who can’t even fire a handgun? I’m not a shirtless macho man with a Gatling gun who can soak up bullets without ever dying.”

At any rate, Heivia had given up on overturning Hina’s view of him, so he simply tried not to scare her.

“Now, you say they’re in the Hawaii District, but that’s more than 130 islands if we count the small ones. Where is this truck headed? I assume you have some kind of idea.”

“Hina is our hint.”

“Hm? I am?”

The brown girl looked confused.

“Or rather, the ocean meteorological research lab we found her in. It was located on the point of a cape so it could look after their precious equipment.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just let him ramble. Tune back in 10 minutes from now and you’ll get the actual answer you want.”

Myonri must have been tired because she did not hold back in the slightest, but Quenser did not let it get to him.

“The arms dealer will be living comfortably in Capitalist Corporations territory and they will have an escape route ready in case the Capitalist Corporations turn on them. They’re on an island and there’s a laser-covered Object here, so the only real option would be a sub. They’ll have planned this out carefully, but that narrows down the possibilities. The ocean surface looks flat, but it has varying terrain as well. There are only so many places where an emergency sub can avoid detection by sonar thanks to thermoclines and brackish water.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“We can check the ocean terrain with Hina, but anywhere the Object overreacts to would be the most suspicious. Heivia, do you remember why the Baby Magnum and the Over Cavitation started fighting in the first place?”

“The coastguard armed with the weapons borrowed from our lend-lease program were attacking the air pump facilities the Capitalist Corporations is using to increase the shark population, so they decided to take a gamble and...”

Heivia trailed off when he caught on.

Quenser snapped his fingers and continued.

“That was their biggest overreaction. There’s something there they want to protect badly enough to send out a Second Generation. The arms dealer is located at one of the Oxyocean Operation air pump facilities. This one.”

The military truck took them to a point on the coast. This time, there was a long bridge heading out to a square artificial island with sides longer than a kilometer. According to Hina, the entire island absorbed the seawater, applied tons of pressure, used microbubbles to infuse it with oxygen, and sent that back down to the deep pits where the hypoxic Sea of Death was located.

Quenser and the others were not reckless enough to ride the truck down the straight bridge with nowhere to hide.

It was known as Tunaroa Bridge and there was no stopping once they started down it. The potatoes climbed out of the military truck after it stopped in front of a sign bearing an illustration of a man with a fishing pole, a giant eel, and a girl.

“Watch out for a monkey army wielding cheap printed guns. Those probably came from the arms dealer.”

“Do you think they’ll try the same thing twice?”

“Watch out for the Object too. Don’t forget that it was the coastguard poking at this hornet’s nest that called the Over Cavitation here in the first place.”

“Oh, god. What can we even do by ‘watching out’? That’s about as useful as learning the weather forecast predicts an extra-large meteor shower raining down on the earth this afternoon.”

Hina Liqueurball was a 12-year-old civilian, so they left her in the military truck.

Would they simply walk across the bridge, or would they use one of the rubber boats with the anemone-like red and orange warning colors on the bottom?

When you could not figure out the right answer, you just had to split your personnel and choose both. Even if one group died, the other would reach the destination.

"Lives are on a really good sale today. It's like we have clearance stickers on our souls."

"Why the hell did you bring Hina on this crowded boat, you idiot!?"

"Que'ser."

"Hina, what!?"

Quenser looked over in shock and yelled, but it was too late now. She had joined them without anyone noticing. And the rubber boat was already headed out to sea with its motor running. If they hung around in one place for too long, a great white shark would probably show up.

Myonri's group would be walking across the bridge directly overhead. And to be extra careful, they would be sending a drone to scout out ahead.

"There's less here than we thought. I was expecting an ambush and a big shootout."

"Let's just hope we don't find the place abandoned."

The boat was faster than on foot, so Quenser's group landed on the artificial island first and used their guns and binoculars to make sure they were safe.

Myonri's group joined them shortly thereafter and the girl spoke up with a cheerful smile.

"Wow, no one died this time. That's pretty unusual."

"Myonri, is this what you're like on your period?"

That comment just about got him shot, so Quenser used Heivia as a shield for the rest of the conversation.

"Anything here?" she asked.

"Not that we can see from the ground. Did the drone see anything?"

“No.”

This was only getting more baffling. They could not find the enemy. It would normally delight them to avoid a deadly battle, but it was still worrisome. It was unnatural and unnerving.

Regardless, they knew this artificial island held something that had led the Over Cavitation to exacerbate the war. And the damaged Baby Magnum had no time. They could not come to a stop just because the place was so unsettling. They wanted accurate information on that Second Generation's undercarriage. And they wanted it now. No matter how suspicious this felt, they had to investigate.

“If this was a horror movie, continuing the mission would be what gets us all killed.”

“Would you prefer waiting out here all alone? That's the guy who always gets killed almost immediately.”

They also could not leave Hina by herself. It was the Capitalist Corporations who saw value in her intellect, so the arms dealer might see no reason to keep her alive.

With no advance knowledge, the artificial island would have looked like a square piece of land covered in factories and pipes. The buildings were of varying heights, which created a warship-like silhouette. The space was crammed full.

“The arms dealer is all about being cheap and reliable. You can see that in the experimental monkeys with printed guns and you can see it in the modernized undercarriage for the Over Cavitation. The ideas are really out there, but they're still sensible. This is not going to be a fun opponent.”

That was when they heard some quiet noises in the distance. These were not gunshots or explosions. It was more like steam valves opening. The island was an air pump facility, so it was sure to have tons of that sort of equipment.

So they assumed that was all it was.

But then a squall of metal balls rained down right next to Quenser.

“Eh?”

It was such an extreme change that his mind failed to keep up at first. They had been relaxed a moment before. They had been smiling together about how no one had died. They had breathed a definite sigh of relief and they had all been alive.

Yet now orange sparks tore away the asphalt.

Metal ball bearings larger than a pachinko ball crashed into the hard ground and bounced back up.

They had been dropped from a great height.

But worst of all, the colors red and black were splattered across the ground.

That was all that remained of their allies. There were no recognizable uniforms, weapons, human flesh, or even dog tags.

They had been reduced to something like jelly.

Their merciless death had been like an invisible giant crushing a row of ants underfoot. If that squall had been directed just three meters to the side, it would have been Quenser and his immediate group that were killed.

“...!!”

Quenser belatedly got on top of Hina to cover her young eyes, but then he heard the same sound again.

It sounded a lot like air escaping something. The breath of the grim reaper was quiet enough to entirely miss it if you were not focused.

“We need a roof! It doesn’t matter what, just get below something that will shield you from the sky!! Quenser, you take care of Hina!!”

Heivia gave a shout while Myonri and the others took off running. It was no time to worry about moving as teams or staying in formation. Quenser had both his hands free, so he scooped up Hina’s small body in a princess carry, pushed open a nearby metal door with his back, and practically fell inside.

The deadly squall filled the outside once more.

“Wh-what is that, Que’ser? What is that!? Don’t go away! I’m scared!!”

“Never fear, lady. It can’t hit us now that we’re inside the building!”

Quenser decided explaining the details would only worry her, so he got straight to the point. And if he kept holding her, he was afraid she would notice he was trembling.

Sometimes people would fire a handgun straight up as a warning shot. It was a common sight in

movies and dramas, but where would that bullet land? Just as a screw or bolt could become a weapon when dropped from a skyscraper roof, the bullet had to land somewhere and it would be quite deadly from the fall. In major metropolises, that probably took more accidental lives each year than lightning strikes.

The arms dealer had properly weaponized that phenomenon. A thick tube was probably stuffed with metal ball bearings and then compressed air or carbon dioxide gas launched them more than 100 meters into the air. That created a squall-like quantity of weapons to suppress a general area when accurate targeting was not needed.

You could not hope to dodge it.

It was a lot like being crushed by a falling ceiling covered in spikes.

It took a bit of work to set up, but it was far cheaper than a standardized machinegun. After all, durability, fire rate, precision, and accuracy could all be ignored. You just had to launch them into the air. If you could ignore its quality as an industrial product, you could cut a lot of corners.

Cheap and reliable.

This new product took lives with cost efficiency.

Quenser clenched his teeth and grabbed his radio.

"Heivia. We can't take the shortest route to regroup outside! Can we find a route that stays below a roof at all times?"

"That squall shot down our drone. We have the general aerial photos on our mobile devices, but that doesn't tell us the exact internal layout. This place is as cluttered as a warship, right? There's no guarantee we can regroup right away. Everyone, use what range of movement you have to eliminate the enemy. Let's clear one safe zone at a time until we can finally regroup. Like water droplets joining together on the window."

"I don't have a gun..."

"But you have Hina who should know a lot about these facilities. You haven't abandoned her, have you? Get her advice as you move along. You came here to fight a war, didn't you?"

"Are you serious?"

"We all got the short end of the stick here. Dammit, I swear I'll survive and meet that legendary maid. I'd love to go on a personal scouting mission in search of her."

“(Is no one on my side anymore!?)”

Quenser clicked his tongue and pulled some Hand Axe plastic explosive from his backpack. He could use that like a grenade if need be...but that raised a crucial question: could he win this labyrinthine indoor battle with nothing but grenades?

(In the worst case, I'll blow myself backwards with my own blast.)

The arms dealer would have more than just the one weapon. The first weapon had eliminated the outdoors area as an option, so the next step would be to pick off the separated potatoes one at a time.

He would have to protect himself here.

And he was not allowed any mistakes with Hina clinging to the side of his hip and giving off a sweet scent from the hibiscus decoration in her black hair. His death would mean her death.

“Lady.”

Fortunately, her small size was an advantage here.

Quenser found some duct tape, copy paper, and plywood nearby and created a rectangular shield she could fully hide behind.

“It’s a bit heavy, but if you hear any noises, hold this out toward it with both hands. Press the bottom of the shield against the floor so there isn’t a gap.”

“...”

“Despite what movies and dramas would have you believe, you can still die of blood loss when shot in the hand or foot, so make sure you stay fully hidden behind the shield. Got that?”

“What about you, Que’ser?”

“Me?”

He would be entirely exposed.

He did not have a single bullet to fire.

They had no idea how many enemies there were or what kind of equipment that enemy had.

Heivia and the others could not rush in to save him no matter how much he asked for help.

The girl's question forced him to focus on those various aspects of reality, but he forced down those thoughts.

He could not let Hina notice his fear while she looked worriedly up at him with the handmade shield, so he shook his head and spoke.

"I'll be fine. C'mon, let's get going."

He had given Hina the shield to protect her from the arms dealer's bullets and from any nearby explosions. He knew he had to do it, but he could not predict what exactly would happen once he started throwing bombs around in this labyrinthine space.

Also, the shield might double as a blindfold and prevent her from seeing the splattered corpses.

"Hina, let's ignore the arms dealer side of things for now. How many workers would they need to keep this place running purely as an air pump facility?"

"Hm. Probably none."

He had not expected that answer.

"They stepped outside their field of expertise and developed an unmanned factory OS for it. Although I think they keep three people here in case of any trouble."

"How can I tell them apart from the bad guys?"

"They'll understand the local language. The foreign soldiers only ever look puzzled when they hear us speak."

"You mean like aloha?"

"Que'ser, that means both hello and goodbye. Did you know you say that at funerals?"

Heivia had been right. Hina was a valuable ally. Maybe even more than an industrially produced handgun.

In this case, they did not have a single set goal such as destroying a turret or reaching the power station. They had to check every room they came across to make sure everything was as safe as possible and eliminate any enemy soldiers they came across. It was a lot like walking around a minefield to find the explosives. You wanted to detect them in advance so you could dig them up. Eliminating them by stepping on them would not be fun.

The corridors were unlit, perhaps because the place was designed to be unmanned. It was all plain concrete. As Quenser walked along with Hina, the imitation ball-and-chain unavoidably made a scraping noise as she dragged it behind her skinny ankle. The chain was too short for her to carry it around in her hands and wrapping a towel around it would not actually help all that much. On straightaways, he tried to make sure there was always a door they could jump inside at a moment's notice. The light through the windows highlighted the dust in the air like a projector beam. There was no air conditioning, so both the heat and the tension made it hard to focus. He felt like he was rotting from the fingertips.

They continued further in while Hina explained that they were in a transformer room or in a storage room for the hunks of salt that came from the seawater due to electrolysis. The salt sounded like it would be easy enough to sell, but the impurities were apparently concentrated along with it and people could not eat it. Pufferfish and shellfish toxins were gathered from the plankton the animal had eaten, so you could not underestimate concentrations of anything from the sea.

But there was no one around.

The arms dealer had weaponized monkeys to keep anyone out of the lab and an enemy waiting behind a door would have been enough to defeat Quenser when he only had bombs to work with. The tension only continued to grow, but there really was no one there.

"This is weird."

He had not wanted a tour of the factory or to explore an abandoned building. The metal ball squall was enough to know the enemy was definitely there. They were not simply in the wrong place. The arms dealer had intentionally let the potatoes cross the bridge and only used the squall once they were on the artificial island so they would flee indoors. They had essentially been split up and trapped. He was certain there would be further attacks. And yet...

"Que'ser."

Hina moved right up next to him while holding the handmade shield in both hands. As if covering him with the shield too. Was she worried and trying to protect him?

Her high body temperature and faint sweet scent reached him.

Quenser longed for his radio. Or rather, he missed the presence and reactions of other people. He knew it was meaningless, but he pressed the switch.

“Heivia, has anything happened there?”

Only static answered him.

“Heivia?”

The enemy was here.

The arms dealer had intentionally invited them in. There was no escape inside this building or on the artificial island as a whole. While trapped in that double prison, they could be easily finished off.

In that case...

“Hina, have your shield at the ready.”

“Why? Are the others being attacked?”

The brown girl looked worriedly up at him, but he said nothing more.

...That was not it.

The jamming was affecting Quenser and Hina. That meant they were the ones being separated from the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. They were the ones surrounded by the hounds.

The battle was approaching.

(The jamming means I can't detonate the fuses via radio.)

This eliminated one of the few cards in his deck. The pen-like fuses could be set to a timer, but timing it right probably took practice.

And as he carefully checked inside each of the doors around them, he noticed something odd.

“What is this?”

There was a large space there.

Whatever the space had been originally designed for, there was now something sitting in the center of it.

It was a flat cylinder that glinted with a silver light. It looked thick and solid and it was larger than a school classroom. The airtight door on the side had a round handle that was turned to open it, just like on a submarine. If not for that door, he probably would not have recognized it as a room.

This was clearly different from everything they had seen so far.

It did not fit in with the rest of the facility.

Hina tilted her head too.

"I don't recognize this. What is it? A pressure cooker?"

She had a good reason for saying that. The scale was different, but the safety valve on the top used the same principle as a pressure cooker. She looked like a small girl, but she was already in college. She may have had even more knowledge than Quenser and it was that knowledge that led her to view this as a pressurized container larger than any she had ever seen.

"Is it a hyperbaric oxygen chamber?" muttered the boy.

Come to think of it, wasn't this an air pump facility meant to increase the valuable shark population by artificially infusing oxygen into the hypoxic Sea of Death?

It was part of the Oxyocean Operation.

It was true that facility's horsepower could be used to run some extraordinary equipment, but...

"That isn't possible."

It was not that Hina had lacked the knowledge.

In fact, it was her knowledge that had prevented her from considering the idea and that now led her to oppose Quenser's suggestion.

"Hyperbaric oxygen chambers are used for medical therapy, not industrial work, right?"

"..."

"This island's air pumps are especially large so they can dissolve oxygen into seawater at a rate of 90,000 liters per minute. If you put a human in such a giant pressure cooker, they wouldn't just hyperventilate. Their red blood cells would rupture or they might just be crushed by the pressure."

“Maybe for a normal human.”

It was gradually coming into view.

He was gradually realizing why the Over Cavitation’s undercarriage had been secretly modernized and why it had wanted to protect this air pump facility that contained a hyperbaric oxygen chamber. How had the arms dealer made themselves indispensable to the Capitalist Corporations? Also, what crucial core component for the Object had they supplied?

And.

Why were civilians like Quenser and Hina being targeted ahead of Heivia, Myonri, or the others?

That was when he heard a sound like an electric razor coming from outside that large space. It was not particularly loud, but he would have heard someone dropping a ball-point pen in this deserted place.

(Is it some kind of drone?)

“Que’ser.”

“(Sh! Over here, Hina.)”

They circled behind the giant pressure cooker of a hyperbaric oxygen chamber.

The sound came from the hallway.

This was a large space, but it had no other exit. He did not know if his explosives could break through the wall and an explosion could ignite the highly concentrated oxygen in the pipes. Detonating one in an open space like a grenade was one thing, but attempting to blow down a thick wall made of who-knows-what would be too risky.

They just had to wait it out.

They just had to hope whatever this was continued right on down the hall.

However...

“(The sound...)”

Hina fearfully squeezed the handmade shield in her hands.

The electric razor sound had stopped near the door. It was not continuing on. It was staying. It was sealing the exit while waiting to see what happened. The machine(?) knew they were here.

“(I’m scared, Que’ser. Is there anywhere with a lock? Oh, I know. Let’s close ourselves in the oxygen chamber.)”

“(They could operate the machinery to knock us out with the pressurized oxygen.)”

This was no time to panic.

The train known as reality was still roaring down the tracks. Gathering the resolve to jump off was useless if it had already passed the station you wanted to reach.

They had to change how they viewed this.

This was still an opportunity.

There was just the one entrance.

Whatever this enemy was, it would have to pass through there. The plastic explosives were not the easiest thing in the world to use, but he could hit the enemy with the blast if he tossed one toward the door. It was too late if he waited until it was already in the large room and could move wherever it wanted. This was the neck of the gourd or hourglass. Taking out the enemy here was his best bet.

“(Hina, wait here with your shield at the ready.)”

“(You’re going on your own? Wait, Que’ser.)”

The hyperbaric oxygen chamber in the center of the large room was a flat cylinder much like a petroleum tank. Unlike a boxy building, it had no corners. That made it difficult to tell how far he could go while staying just out of sight.

“(Que’ser.)”

The tearful girl ended up following him. If he was killed now, the enemy would not just leave, assuming they had killed everyone. If he died, they both died. The look in his eyes grew a bit sharper. He had to take this seriously. Ensuring their safety by crushing the enemy was the only option left.

While leaning against the curved metal wall and slowly moving forward, he rolled a ball of plastic explosive and stabbed in a pen-like electric fuse. The jamming kept him from using a remote detonation, but the timer would work fine. If he set it to three seconds, he could use it just like a grenade.

Although that was still a problem since Quenser was not all that familiar with using normal grenades.

“...”

He was pretty sure he had gone as far as he could without being seen from the door.

He would be spotted if he went any further.

He silently came to a stop and raised the ball of plastic explosive to shoulder height. He of course held it in the hand opposite the wall to his side. This would be a side throw. It was basically the same as a grenade, but it was soft like clay and he could not expect it to bounce and roll. He had to picture it flying in a parabolic arc and landing right where he wanted it.

The electric razor sound continued.

But he also heard some light footsteps.

(Feet?)

This was not just a drone. Was there someone with it? He was still confused, but the situation did not wait for him to figure it out. The sound of the footsteps changed.

The person had moved from the hallway to the large room.

He had no idea who this was, but they had just walked through the door. That was the neck of the gourd or hourglass. The difference in skill was irrelevant. This was his first and last chance for an amateur's explosion to actually work!!

“Hh!!”

His life was on the line, but...no, so his thoughts were of secondary importance. The fuse was set to three seconds. The pressing situation led him to lean out and throw the hunk of clay. It was a side throw that sort of tossed it around the wall of the oxygen chamber.

And he realized something once he leaned out.

The enemy was a human woman.

But he was not sure if he should call her a soldier. After all, she was not wearing a military uniform. She may have been that kind of person because other than her military boots, she only wore a small bottle hanging from her neck by a thread and a thin ribbon wrapped loosely around her. The tall woman with radiant skin walked casually through the door with her long red hair fluttering behind her.

And she had giant red wings behind her back.

“Wha-?”

Was she not actually human?

This was a greater shock than her radiant nudity.

What was she? What in the world was she!?

With a loud compressing sound, the wings roared to life. It looked all the world like they had melted into a streamlined shape, but that was not it. The electric razor sound remained and the wings were technically not connected to the naked woman’s back.

(That sound...is it the same rotors that drones use? Did she attach armor to a flying car!?)

He did not have time to speak out loud.

The wings roared through the air and accurately struck the clay to knock it back toward Quenser with a sound like a metal bat.

With the jamming in effect, he could not use a remote detonation and had instead used a timed one.

He had set it to three seconds.

It was just like a grenade.

“Oh, shi-...!?”

He did not have time to hit it back into his opponent’s court like a game of badminton.

The Hand Axe mercilessly detonated above his head.

Part 8

More than his ears, it felt like all the organs in his gut were being squeezed. It may have been an issue of pressure instead of the noise or shockwave.

“Ghhh!!”

Quenser doubled over but was not blown to bits. There were a few reasons for that. First, he had not modified the plastic explosive for anti-personnel use, such as wrapping a hard zip tie around it or filling it with metal balls. Second, it had blown up in the air a short distance away from him instead of right at his feet.

And third...

“Hina!?”

“Que’ser!!”

Hina Liqueurball had stepped forward and held the handmade shield overhead. The one blast broke through the cushioning made from copy paper and snapped the plywood in two, but he would have been killed without it there.

Hina was defenseless without the makeshift shield, so he picked her up with both arms and moved back on unsteady legs.

The woman with only a loosely wrapped ribbon covering her nudity had yet to do anything.

“Now, then.”

She spoke for the first time.

She was finally taking action.

Were the red wings meant to make her look like an angel or like a demon?

She grabbed a red flower petal from the small bottle hanging from her neck and placed it on her tongue like it was the forbidden fruit.

In what almost seemed like an afterthought, the symmetrical weapons – probably an armored version of a flying car – moved casually out.

They gave a roar of their electric razor sound.

Now it was Quenser's turn to save Hina. He got on the ground with her below him while the wings passed by overhead with a weight closer to a car than a motorcycle.

"Eek!?"

"Don't worry, lady. We're still alive!"

A single hit would kill them instantly.

Hina's body temperature and sweet scent were the only things proving they were not yet ghosts.

Flying cars might sound impressive, but some were modeled after airplanes and some after helicopters. These were something like multicopter drones weighing more than a ton. Their streamlined bodies did not have the crane fly shape of the recon drones, but that was only because the rotors were contained inside and the air was released through vents, just like fans that hid their blades.

"Wait, I thought they were all about cheap and reliable!!"

Quenser gave a shout and somehow managed to get back on his feet. He grabbed Hina's warm hand and half-dragged her back some more. Being in that naked woman's field of vision was too dangerous. The red wings had not returned after passing by, so they must have circled all the way around the cylindrical hyperbaric oxygen chamber so she could retrieve them. They were cars, after all, so they moved much faster than people.

An unhealthily saccharine voice reached him from around the curved metal wall.

Had his comment drawn her attention, or was she trying to distract them while she planned an attack from behind?

"These are actually surprisingly cheap."

Once they saw each other once more, one side or the other would lose their life.

And at this rate, it would be Quenser and Hina.

"We have already built a commercial model. As long as you don't have any weird dealers acting as middlemen, you can buy these for as much as a used car."

The cost of various different military vehicles varied wildly, but the most expensive tanks could cost as much as 10 million euros each. Not even hitting the jackpot at the lottery would be enough for that. Given the price of vehicles that could survive in this field, that probably was incredibly cheap.

“Who are-...?”

“Dora Blue-Hawaii. You can address me as queen, mistress, honey, or whatever you like really.”

He was not about to just believe her. That was indeed a Capitalist Corporations last name, but it seemed a little too convenient to find someone with “Hawaii” in their name while actually in Hawaii. Plus, he doubted someone from a criminal arms dealer would offer their real name so easily.

“I assume you already know what this place is used for. And why I ignored the others to eliminate you first.”

“...”

Small Hina tugged on Quenser’s uniform. She pointed past the cylinder wall behind them. She probably wanted to say that continuing to move back would take them all the way around and back to the exit where they could escape the room, but Quenser doubted it would be that easy. When he patted the top of her head to calm her elevated heartrate, she had a somewhat ticklish reaction. They would only have an instant to act. For example, if Dora sent the two wings around the cylinder in different directions, Quenser and Hina would be caught between them at some point.

(If they really are as bulletproof as an armored truck, a normal gun won’t work. Throwing a randomly balled-up bomb won’t work either. I need something made to pierce armor. I don’t know how we win without a shoulder-fired missile like Heivia carries around.)

It was a lot like a driverless car with impenetrable tires charging straight toward a checkpoint. If you could not shoot out the tires or the driver, stopping it with bullets would be no easy task. And what if the entire thing was covered with thick bulletproof armor?

These things could crush the enemy with their speed and weight and they could also act as a shield to protect their user from gunfire. This special equipment was the best of both worlds.

“Your product wasn’t a new propulsion device. It was a much more important core component.”

“That is correct.”

“What we saw out there was no more than an optional feature added for balancing purposes. It was not the main point.”

“Exactly. Which is why I must kill you for revealing our precious Parasite Plan. Although after coming this far, I would still silence you even if you were completely off base.”

Either Dora felt no need to carry a gun herself or she was not accustomed to using her own “products”. He had no definite proof, but Quenser decided not to be optimistic. No matter how absurd it might look, this woman had found a way to survive on the front line. And she did so without joining a world power or using the clean war system. That was a shocking thing for someone who was protected by the system.

“That explains why the Capitalist Corporations couldn’t ignore you. And why they immediately sent out the Over Cavitation to protect a foreign criminal group.”

“Oh, is that what you call her? The Second Generation Antoinette is already ours. The parasite process is complete. It now works for us more than the Capitalist Corporations. Nh, hh.”

She punctuated her sentence with an odd breath because she had removed a flower petal from the small bottle and placed it in her mouth.

That said, if she was following them around, there was a way to fight back. He could not change the plan on the fly with the remote option removed, but if he set the timer to 30 seconds or a minute and placed the explosive on the metal wall or a corner bordering the floor, he could lure Dora into the blast range.

(And those wings are flying cars. She can have them charge toward a destination point, but they shouldn’t be able to remove any garbage located around the corner. That’s the hardest part of designing a cleaning robot!)

They no longer had the handmade shield.

Simply circling around the curved metal wall was not enough. At the moment of detonation, Quenser tightly held Hina’s warm body and curled up.

A deafening boom filled the space and a faint sweet aroma scattered around.

This one had not been knocked back. It would have exploded at her feet.

However...

“So did you really think you could kill me with that?”

(It definitely went off! Wait, did she do what I think she did!?)

“My shields are much more precise. Do you want to try a chemical round next? Maybe some napalm or white phosphorous? These multirotor ‘flying cars’ are giant fans powerful enough to keep a 1-ton mass afloat at all times. Did you honestly think flesh-and-blood soldiers stood any chance against their control of the air currents and air pressure?”

That powerful wind pushed up a literal ton of metal.

They could divert the current of poison gas or a flamethrower. It was possible even a long-range sniper rifle would be useless against her.

Either the thick shields would deflect it or the air power would divert it. Either way, her defenses were impregnable.

(What do I do?)

There was no time.

She was not going to wait around for him to think.

(Normal explosions don’t work. I can’t even touch her without doing something about those wings first! But how is she controlling them with this jamming in effect!?)

Due to the explosion, they had circled a good bit around the cylindrical hyperbaric oxygen chamber. When viewed as the face of a clock, Quenser and Hina were at 4 o’clock, Dora was at 9 o’clock, and the exit was at 12 o’clock. Hina tugged on his uniform again, but this was not really their chance to escape. Dora was trying to end this inside the large room. That meant 12 o’clock was their time limit. It was a giant hornet’s nest. If they thoughtlessly arrived there, she would immediately send both red wings their way. She would have them circle around on either side at more than 100km/h. They would be trapped between the two weapons with no escape.

(All signals are being jammed. IR would be easily blocked by fire. Ultrasound would be affected by the strong winds. Are they just fully autonomous using an offline program? No, that would put her life at risk. If they malfunctioned like a shoplifting sensor, she’d be screwed, so she wouldn’t rely on that. There must be some kind of wireless interface that lets her make direct adjustments!!)

He would only be able to make one or two more moves.

There was little time left until the flying armored cars made their final charge, but he could not afford to make any mistakes.

“The Parasite Plan? You mean your product was the Pilot Elite, don’t you!?”

"The Antoinette was an excellent Second Generation, but it seems her Elite came down with an endemic disease. It would have taken a while for them to finally die, but it was not difficult for us to 'fine-tune' a new one."

That had to be a lie.

It could not have been that easy, but Dora made it sound like nothing.

"That said, Objects are generally only compatible with the one pilot. It is not easy for two Elites to pilot the same Object at the same level. So the Parasite Plan needed to alter the structure of the Object for the new Elite while keeping the basic frame the same. So we had to create the world's best Object for her specifically."

Even the best Object was worthless without someone to pilot it. A weapon that only absorbed maintenance expenses would only create greater and greater losses as it sat in storage. It would have to be scrapped.

But the arms dealer had said they could breathe new life into it.

For the Capitalist Corporations, it must have felt like selling their soul to the devil.

"This hyperbaric oxygen chamber might look like an execution device, but it was actually used to make adjustments to the Pilot Elite, wasn't it?"

"It apparently feels like a comfortable hammock to her. But, well, it has made her very concerned about weather data. She apparently gets headaches when the pressure changes."

Quenser doubted the outside pressure could actually affect someone inside an Object cockpit, so it was probably a psychological thing. What had happened to the original Elite who fell ill? Had they had headaches, or had they requested the meteorological data for some other reason? There was no way to know now.

Quenser came to a stop.

Hina kept tugging on the side of his hip and turning toward the exit with a sweet scent coming from her black hair, but they could not fall back any further than this.

They had arrived at the oxygen chamber's submarine-like door and console.

(Think.)

Quenser fought with his pounding heart.

(She has those armored flying cars, she's naked and doesn't have a gun, and those things always stay by her side to protect her. The jamming isn't causing her any trouble and they can manipulate the air. There has to be something there. There has to be a logical solution!!)

"Que'ser..."

While clinging to his hip, Hina looked up at him and spoke as if her heart could not bear the pressure.

And he looked down at her.

He saw the tears welling up in her eyes, her healthy chocolate-colored skin, her glossy black hair, and the hibiscus decoration on her head.

(Could it be?)

It was like a piece of trick art.

He had not noticed it at all before, but once it occurred to him and he observed his surroundings again, something was definitely off. It made no sense for that to be here. And if that meant Dora must have snuck it in for her own purposes.

He had to bet on this.

He gripped some of the clay-like Hand Axe plastic explosive.

"Dora!!"

"Come to think of it, I never got your name."

A single hit would mean instant death.

Neither one knew the other's real name, but they both prepared their deadly weapons as the final clash began.

Part 9

There was no reason for concern.

Dora Blue-Hawaii only had to do the same thing again.

She audibly swallowed the red flower petal in her mouth.

She sent it to her stomach.

She had one of the red wings remain by her side to protect her while she sent the other toward the target. A 1-ton mass of armor would collide with them at 80km/h. That would be even more deadly than an anti-materiel rifle. Her opponent would be torn to pieces even if they wore a full-body powered suit.

This would end it.

Or so she thought.

“Que’ser!”

“?”

But the naked woman frowned in confusion when she walked casually around the curved metal wall. The boy in what appeared to be a Legitimacy Kingdom uniform had indeed been knocked to the ground, but something was wrong. He was too clean for someone hit by a head-on collision with a 1-ton mass moving at highway speeds. The figure the local girl was tearfully clinging to did not look at all broken.

Dora toyed with the ribbon wrapped loosely around her.

(Did it miss? Did it only catch at the end of his clothing?)

However.

The machine would not malfunction without a reason. There had to be an explanation for why it had missed. Dora removed a red petal from the small bottle, placed it on her tongue, and tried to call back the wing she had sent out, but then she gasped.

She took a step to the side in her boots.

The red wing maintained its speed and violently crashed into the floor. The solid floor dented in. If she had stayed where she was, it might have turned her to mincemeat.

This was a first.

It had looked casual, but Dora had still taken evasive action.

“What happened?”

She saw the other one – the one she had kept with her for defense – wobbling unnaturally. It was not completely out of control, but it could stall and fall to the floor at any moment. And it was a literal ton of metal, so it could easily be a disaster if it so much as fell on her little toe.

What had that uniformed boy done at the last second? It had not looked like he threw a plastic explosive as the one trick he knew.

Just then, Dora Blue-Hawaii finally noticed something on the curved metal wall. The airtight door to the hyperbaric oxygen chamber sat partially open and the console’s light was flashing.

Plastic explosives were a special kind of explosive made by combining normal explosives with malleable rubber. They were stable enough that they would not explode without a special fuse, but they also inherited the traits of the rubber. If you dumped them in hot water, they would melt. If you removed the plastic packaging and left them in the open air for a long period of time, they could grow cracked and dissolve.

Left in the open air.

Oxygen.

So if you threw one into that hyperbaric oxygen chamber that used the air pump facility’s power to produce enough pressure to kill the person inside...

“It wasn’t EM, IR, or ultrasound.”

“Kh.”

The boy spoke from the floor.

He was weak, but he smiled and raised his middle finger.

“It was the smell. They use an ion absorption sensor. You’re naked because you control them using the adrenaline or whatever that’s mixed into your sweet sweat. That’s also why you keep taking petals out of that bottle and eating them. You didn’t want to use a gun because you had to keep the gun smoke smell out of your hair. Those giant fans don’t just blow out air; they’re made so one of them absorbs the air and the other blows it back out. Although that means you can’t send them very far even though they’re unmanned.”

“Dammit!!”

“When I hold Hina, I can sense a sweet scent from her hair. ...You never know what will give you the inspiration you need to turn everything around. Hina can smell like that since she’s a civilian, but I shouldn’t have sensed the same thing from someone on the battlefield like you.”

Of course, not just any scent would have done the trick. Dora had said she could handle poison gas and white phosphorus.

But everything changed if he could guess what she used to make the judgment. He hated to admit it, but Dora had a nice body. It was hard to imagine a bitter or sour smell coming from her skin or hair.

It was sweet.

The unique stench of melting rubber could sometimes seem sweet.

That had confused the controls.

Dora gave a shout and sent in one of the red wings. The boy in the military uniform pulled the brown girl close and rolled to the side. Normally, that would never be enough to dodge it, but things were different now. It failed to keep up with his amateurish movement, just barely missed him, and crashed into the half-open door to the hyperbaric oxygen chamber, slamming it shut.

A failed attack was acceptable.

But she also had to question the precision of their defenses. A single mistake there could literally cost her everything. That was the much bigger problem.

Dora Blue-Hawaii made a swift decision.

She still had an overwhelming advantage. It would be a problem if the intruders destroyed the hyperbaric oxygen chamber, but there was no need to finish this here. She could fall back and try again later. She could escape elsewhere and then make an attack with the pair of red wings to turn those small fries to mincemeat in a single second.

But.

But.

But.

A floral scent snuck into Dora's nose.

"Ugh!?"

The wings casually fell to the floor. The naked woman came to a complete stop. The flying cars had not completely ceased functioning, but they weighed a literal ton each. If she tried to send them out while imbalanced like this, they might run wild like a pinwheel firework and crush her instead.

That boy had said you never know what would give you the inspiration you needed to turn everything around.

"..."

It was that chocolate-colored girl who Dora had thought was powerless.

She had a hibiscus decoration in her hair. Was it not just an imitation? The boy had grabbed that flower and crushed it in his hand. All so he could scatter the sweet scent created by mixing a girl's sweat with a flower's nectar.

That was the same as the scent created by the contents of Dora's bottle after it passed through her female body.

She could not have wielded these weapons like this on a normal battlefield. Soldiers generally wanted to remain odorless to not give away their position to the enemy, so they would avoid not just perfume but soaps and clothing starch too.

But things were different here.

All four world powers had a presence in the Hawaii District and it was not a battlefield country. It was a blank zone that belonged to no one. The civilians living in the cities would be covered in all sorts of scents.

Dora heard someone tearing a plastic explosive away from collapsed Quenser's hand. It was Hina Liqueurball.

The deadly weapon looked entirely out of place in the 12-year-old girl's hands.

She nervously turned toward the naked woman.

"Oh, what do you know," said Dora. "I recognize you."

“ ... ”

“I visited the Rocky Coast Ocean Meteorological Research Lab a few times, so you recognize me, don’t you?”

But she was not asking the girl to spare her.

In fact...

“But I’m surprised. I thought you were more obedient...no, more powerless than this. I mean, the Oxyocean Operation run by that lab is increasing the population of dangerous great whites. Surely you aren’t going to say you have forgotten how your parents died.”

It was Quenser and not Hina who gasped at that.

And Dora’s words continued as if mercilessly digging into an old scar.

“You gave up and decided it was useless to resist when they threatened you with guns and brought up your debt, didn’t you? You knew you could not fight the grownups. And you used the very intellect your parents rubbed your head and praised you for to assist a program creating more of the very sharks that ate them! Ah ha ha!! So is this a belated attempt at a moving revenge scene? Don’t make me laugh! We both know you’re just a weak little puppy that wags her tail for whichever side the seesaw is currently tilting toward!! Do you really think you can take back your life now!?”

Thinking back, it would be hard to say Quenser had not noticed anything out of the ordinary.

When the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had blown up the lab’s prison-like walls and stormed the facility, why had Hina stuck so close to Quenser? Why had she followed him here instead of returning to her safe home?

She had wanted the power to fight.

Even if she did return home, she would not have found any warmth there.

She had wanted someone to rely on.

He was just some older boy she had happened to meet that day. He was little more than a stranger, but she had longed for someone who would take her side. She had wanted to hear someone speaking out against the increase in man-eating great whites.

So she had felt like maybe it was possible to go back to the way things were.

“Do it.”

With only the loose ribbon to cover her nudity, Dora gave an odd smile and spoke to the girl.

She was one of the arms dealers that had tried to absorb even the greedy Capitalist Corporations military.

“We both know you can’t do it. You would come to regret it. Do you think the Legitimacy Kingdom will accept you as one of theirs if you help them!? They’ll be gone before you know it, you’ll be left all alone again, and the seesaw will tilt back toward the Capitalist Corporations! But you’ll have been branded a traitor, so who will save you then!? First your parents, then the soldiers!! Everyone will abandon you, just like they did m-...”

She was cut off by a quiet sound.

Something had bounced off the center of her bare chest.

It was a pen-like electric fuse Quenser had tossed over from the floor.

The timer was set to three seconds.

The fuse alone produced a bang louder than a firecracker. The small bottle at her neck shattered, the ribbon wrapped loosely around her shredded, and her soft flesh burst with a dark red color. With a hole the size of a ping pong ball torn in the center of Dora Blue-Hawaii’s chest, blood gushed out and she collapsed backwards.

“Shut the hell up,” spat out the boy in an unusually violent tone of voice.

Quenser took his time standing up and pulled out his mobile device. He was of course targeting the red wings Dora had used. He attached a cable to those armored flying cars, extracted their data, and cut off the jamming.

He could finally use his radio again.

“Heivia, I have the Over Cavitation’s plans. And this is the complete version that includes the modernized parts the arms dealer added in their Parasite Plan. Use this to support the Princess.”

“You weren’t responding, so I was afraid you’d died. Where are you? We were just starting to withdraw!”

“Withdraw? Was Dora not the only arms dealer using some bizarre weapon?”

“Don’t be dumb!! Do you have any idea how bad things have gotten while you were being jammed? It’s the Object! The Over Cavitation is headed this way!! Just like when the coastguard attacked and got turned to Swiss cheese!!”

“...”

Just like then.

But Quenser had to wonder if it really would be just like then. What if the Over Cavitation’s new Pilot Elite could detect Dora’s defeat through brainwaves, an EKG, or something? It was possible the Elite would ignore all previous assumptions and blow away the entire island to get back at Quenser.

What had the Elite really wanted to protect?

If the answer was not the equipment used to maintain her, then she would be wailing in the cockpit right now.

“Hina, I have the data we need, so let’s get out of here. Hina?”

She did not respond, so he looked back to find the chocolate-colored girl named Hina Liqueurball slowly approaching the arms dealer woman.

Dora Blue-Hawaii.

The naked woman.

But she did wear solid military boots on her feet. That had been curious, so Hina crouched down and removed the right boot to reveal the foot below.

There was an old scar around the woman’s ankle.

It was the unique scar of someone who had spent a long time dragging around a ball-and-chain just like Hina’s.

“Sur...prised?”

Just like they did me.

This woman had used whatever tricks and underhanded methods she could to break free of that closed-off life.

That arms dealer had traded something for great wealth and celebrity status.

And with her dying breath, she left behind just the one word with the smile of a mischievous child.

Part 10

They finally managed to regroup.

With young Hina in tow, Quenser exchanged a look with Heivia and Myonri. While Quenser had been fighting Dora, the others had searched the facility on their own and they had secured the few ordinary workers stationed there. That explained the few unfamiliar faces in Hawaiian shirts.

“Holing up inside isn’t going to help. In fact, there’s nothing but pipes and tanks full of concentrated oxygen around here. If an Object fires one of its huge-ass cannons, who knows how much of the place is going to blow up!”

They heard a loud sound from outside that was more like spraying steam than a metal shell.

They hesitantly approached a window to check.

“The bridge is falling.”

“I guess it isn’t going to let us escape.”

They were already within the Over Cavitation’s firing range. If they stood in front of it, they would be crushed immediately. They were afraid to use their radios, but they had to check on the situation.

It was unclear how much good it actually did, but they used some of the facility’s radio equipment to help disguise their signal.

“Princess, are you still alive!?”

“Just barely. And I wouldn’t be if the Over Cavitation hadn’t made an unnatural course change.”

“If you can still move your Object, then let’s end this. We have the accurate plans, including the Parasite Plan part. The new leg-like propulsion device disguised as a bipod at the base of the main canon is really just a form of aircushion. It uses a layer of air to kick off the ocean surface like it’s stepping on an invisible balloon. It only works on the water. Princess, if you follow my instructions, you can strike back at it. Do you think you can do that!?”

“Just get to the point.”

She really was a great girl who you could rely on. Just having her nearby gave you plenty of opportunities. Quenser shared the plans he had taken from Dora's device, explained his idea, and urged them all to action.

Of course, success was not guaranteed.

They had run across plenty of accidents and unforeseen circumstances while reaching this point and more than a few of their comrades had fallen along the way.

Quenser had no way of taking responsibility if this failed spectacularly.

But everyone still set to work.

They were sick of waiting around to be killed. If there was any chance at all, they were on board. That was the thought process pushing them onward.

"Hina, if you're going to run and hide, use that storage room over there. It looks like they added on an empty space not in the original plans. There is a panic room in case of an explosion, but if their Elite knows the layout, that will be the first place she targets. Thick walls can't save you, but a location the enemy doesn't expect can. Hina?"

"..."

The girl felt like she was being left behind.

She simply stood there with her head lowered, so Quenser crouched down to look her in the eye from below.

"How?"

"Hina."

"How can you stay so positive?"

Finally, she got the words out.

"I couldn't do anything. I knew dad couldn't swim and mom never would have forced him to go into the ocean. It made no sense that they were attacked by sharks while surfing, but I had to believe what the grownups said!"

"..."

"I was afraid of the Object! I was afraid of all the grownups in army uniforms!! We found the arms dealer, but all I did was tremble in fear!! You were the one that ended it, Que'ser. Even though I had the bomb in my hand and the enemy was right there!!"

...Who could blame her?

She had a gun pressed against her head, her debt was used against her, the police, the military, and the law were all stacked against her, the entire adult world around her had viewed her with scorn, and the parents who should have protected her were no longer there. Who in the world could blame her and call her a coward for holding her tongue to protect her own life?

But.

Just because no one blamed her did not mean it had not built up inside her little by little. Until it was too much to bear.

"I always knew it wasn't an accident. Mom and dad welcomed in all the foreign people who moved here. And they said it was wrong to treat some of them better than others, so they got into arguments with people from the Capitalist Corporations who claim to be in charge here! They knew what the Oxyocean Operation would do, so on that night, they said they were going to discuss it with the people running the program! They said those people would understand if they talked it out!! But they...!!!!!!!"

"Hey."

Quenser spoke lightly to interrupt her increasingly erratic words.

"I think you're confused about something, lady. We aren't saints. Just because the people who fought the right thing doesn't mean the people who didn't fight did the wrong thing. We only say that to keep the wars running smoothly. If we don't make the soldiers look like badass heroes, no one's going to enlist. So throw out that idea of justice and focus on the dumber things you can actually believe in."

"But they...my mom and dad and I couldn't do anything!!"

"Hina, your parents stayed true to themselves to the very end."

Little Hina's eyes opened wide.

She looked like she had stopped breathing and Quenser had more to say to her.

"Increasing the shark population for profit will get the ignorant tourists eaten first. And your parents

would have known how dangerous it was to aggravate the professional killers of the military in private talks. ...But they still did it. They still didn't rely on guns. Nor did they rely on terrorism or guerilla warfare. They decided they would fight with their words and they stepped up onto the final stage with that as their weapon."

"..."

"That's a noble thing. The lies we tell to facilitate war have nothing on that. Lady, your parents risked their lives to stay true to that path, so are you going to defile it now? It isn't violence that decides who's strong and who's weak or who's right and who's wrong."

He could not say anything more.

Hina's face crumpled as she hugged crouching Quenser and exploded into tears.

She had not avenged her parents.

It may have been the most difficult decision she had ever made.

But it was a much stronger and more human decision than someone who icily held a gun or knife over the corpse of their hated foe. Hina Liqueurball was smart enough to have pulled it off if she had put her mind to it, but she could remain a kind girl for now.

Heivia and Myonri waved over at Quenser from a short distance away.

They were done with their preparations.

With Hina still hugging him, Quenser nodded and used his empty hand to grab something that had fallen to the floor.

It was a tool that looked like a pair of wire cutters enlarged to the size of a two-handed pair of scissors.

It was a pair of chain cutters.

"Don't worry, lady."

He kept it short.

And he made his point clear.

"We'll take care of all the dirty work. You don't need to dirty your hands over this."

There was a snapping sound.

It was a clear sign of a counterattack. It was the sound of him cutting the chain holding that binding metal ball to the girl's ankle.

Part 11

The Over Cavitation was fast.

Its target was defenseless and stationary, it knew the facility's internal structure, and it had no need to hold back any longer. It fired spears of white steam and air bubbles while circling that 1km square of land given a warship-like silhouette by the many buildings of various sizes.

The thick concrete walls and the pipes large enough for someone to stand in were shattered and blown away like styrofoam.

Heivia's eyes widened and he got down on the ground as rubble fell from overhead.

"Watch out!!"

"We expected this, remember? Okay, it's keeping a distance of 3km. This is our chance. That's a lot closer than I expected!"

"This is our chance? This!?"

"After hiding and crying all alone for so long, Hina made a choice none of us could. She chose not to fight despite the situation. I can't let that go unrewarded!"

"Tch. Fine, then!! I guess we can be the cavalry for just the one day!!"

Since Objects fought from ranges of 10km, the enemy had essentially rushed right up to them. Even though its special main cannon used steam, this was unthinkable when up against a stationary target. The Pilot Elite must have been furious.

But both sides had a reason to kill the other.

That criminal group had further corrupted the already awful Capitalist Corporations military. Quenser had made a promise to Hina who had resisted the temptation even though her parents had been killed. He would show his respect for that strength. Quenser and the others were not going to

let those pieces of shit have free rein in the Hawaii District any longer.

As expected, the Object skewered the crucial parts of the facility, such as the compression tanks, the power room, and the panic room.

But that knowledge of the internal structure could be a problem. Either the Elite was unaware of the room added after construction was complete, or she simply did not even consider the sturdy storeroom where Hina and the others were hiding.

That relieved Quenser's concerns.

Now the wolves could focus on hunting their large prey.

"Let's get started, Heivia. We only have one shot at this."

"You really are a freak for licking your lips at a time like this."

The air pump facility, which removed the oxygen from the seawater via electrolysis and then sent that oxygen back into the ocean, was badly damaged, but it had already completed the action they required.

The Object was 3km away.

Quenser's group on the island could not approach. They would be slaughtered before they could get the rubber boat out there.

Quenser slapped Heivia on the back.

His awful friend was resting a missile launcher on his shoulder.

"Fire that thing."

With a fwoosh reminiscent of a firework being launched, the explosive flew off in a straight line. They did not have time to watch its progress to see if it did its job. It was powerful and convenient for a handheld weapon, but the smoke tended to give away the launch point and staying put was a good way of being hit by a counterattack.

A Second Generation loaded with laser beams would have any number of chances to shoot down the missile. But the laser beams and low-stability plasma cannons gathered on the three towers built on top of the Object wavered back and forth in a weirdly human sort of hesitation. The missile was not headed toward the Over Cavitation. It would fall into the ocean before reaching the Object.

But that accomplished what Quenser's group wanted. As long as it hit the ocean surface, they did not care if it was shot down along the way.

They just needed a ball of flames to land in the ocean.

"This facility takes in tons of ocean water, uses microbubbles and a high pressure environment to dissolve oxygen into it at a rate of 90,000 liters per minute, and sends it back to the hypoxic Sea of Death found in the deep ocean pits."

Quenser could not stop smiling as he rolled out and dove toward more cover. He could not help but smile when he did this, so he could never walk the same path as Hina.

However, there were things he could protect because of that nature.

"But using electrolysis on the ocean water gives you more than just oxygen. You also get hydrogen. What happens if you dissolve a bunch of that into the ocean instead? And what happens if you ignite it?"

The Over Cavitation was knocked upwards from below as if all the seawater below had become a single giant bomb.

It was a hydrogen explosion.

The basic concept was the same one seen in simple experiments done by elementary school children everywhere. But the scale here was very different. The shock was enough for that 200,000-ton mass to literally float up into the air.

"Modernization? A new propulsion device? Bipod-like legs? I don't give a shit about your Parasite Plan! Did you really think I'd give you a chance to use your secret weapon!?"

Quenser yelled out at the Object, but it was not over yet.

That impact would have split the average warship in half, but the Over Cavitation had not sunk yet. It endured. Its presence seemed to loudly announce that only an Object could defeat an Object and that message was meant to squeeze at the puny soldier's hearts.

Even its small cannon could blow them to smithereens. The two idiots had dived behind cover out of habit, but if the Object was serious about attacking them, it could break through that cover like it was wet tissue paper.

But the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes were still smiling. They had all gone pale and were soaked with a nervous sweat, but they saw no sign of an unforeseen accident.

Yes.

All of this was still part of the plan.

Quenser, the originator of the plan, shouted into his radio.

“It’s about to react! Everyone get ready!!”

Part 12

Hina Liqueurball could not just sit there.

She and the air pump facility workers had hidden in the sturdy storeroom added after the initial construction, but she could not stand it any longer.

Quenser and the others who had cut the chain from her ankle were fighting on her behalf.

If they lost, they were sure to die. If they won, they could not escape the label of murderers. But they had not hesitated in the face of that harsh choice.

“Nn!”

She opened the heavy door and left on her own.

She gave no concern for her short skirt and ran out with the legs now freed from the GPS ball-and-chain. She swayed unsteadily and tilted a bit diagonally as she ran down the corridor. She had meant to head to the exit, but the third floor wall had crumbled away, revealing the scene outside.

“Ah...”

There, the chocolate-colored girl became a witness of history.

“Ahh!?”

The ocean had changed color.

It was no longer the beautiful clear blue with a hint of green used on postcards and tourist sites. It had a sinister fury. Something like a dark clump of rock jutted out from it. It must have been quite hot because steam was rising into the sky with more intensity than smoke from a chimney.

It was a submarine volcano.

Quenser and the others had filled the air pumps with hydrogen and sent it into this area of ocean. But how far had it gone? Not just in length or width, but in depth. If the “single bomb” that had created reached the ocean floor, it would have violently shaken the earth’s crust itself.

The pumps had been designed to send oxygen-filled water to the deep pits where the hypoxic Sea of Death was most common.

To start with, heavy pressure had been used to infuse the seawater with lots of hydrogen and that was sent to the depths of the ocean.

Even if the pressure of those depths was insufficient and some of the hydrogen separated from the water, hydrogen was the lightest element. It would only rise, so large bubbles of hydrogen would have been rising from the bottom of the ocean like an upside-down waterfall.

In other words, it had all been connected.

If one point was detonated, the explosion would instantly spread to the entire area.

That created an artificial earthquake.

And that led to a forced eruption.

The Hawaii District was known as a disaster-prone area due to its many active volcanos and more than 30 hurricanes each year.

As all that lava flowed out, it had rapidly cooled in the seawater and hardened into rock. As that rock continued to grow, the ocean bottom broke the surface and formed an island.

The Over Cavitation, or Antoinette, was a Second Generation built for naval battles, so it was like a fish out of water. It could not move on land even with the new bipod-like legs.

A heavy rumbling arrived.

The battered Legitimacy Kingdom Object used a barely-functioning main cannon to slowly take aim from the distance.

As badly damaged as that Object was, it would never miss a stationary target that had been flipped onto its side to reveal its belly.

This was checkmate.

“...”

Hina had skipped all the way to college, so she understood the science behind the trick.

But she still softly gripped the ID card at her flat chest. No, she was reaching for the cartoonish character sticker she had placed on the card.

The character was from a legend known all across Polynesia, which included the Hawaii District. The generous man had never grown out of his mischievous nature no matter how much power he gained and he had taught humans how to use fire.

Maui Tikitiki.

That god of hers was said to have fished their islands from the bottom of the ocean in order to save someone's life.

With a deafening blast, the Baby Magnum's low-stability plasma cannon pierced the wicked monster.

Part 13

“Princess.”

“What is this weird frequency? This isn't our encryption format.”

“You're already pretty badly damaged, so can you do one last thing for me? Purge one of your destroyed main cannons. If possible, break the laser beam's solvent tank so its contents leak into the ocean. The brighter the color the better.”

“Hm? What good does that do??? It will break down on its own.”

“It doesn't have to actually do anything. As long as it ruins their brand's image.”

“Wait...”

“Defeating the Over Cavitation doesn't actually stop the entire Oxyocean Operation. Even if we destroyed all of the air pump facilities, they could always rebuild them. So I want some other way of stopping the Capitalist Corporations' plan.”

“They're increasing the shark population because the fins are a luxury ingredient, aren't they?”

"If their ruined image causes the price to plummet, that business plan fails, right? Whether used as a luxury ingredient or a collagen gel for makeup foundation, the shark fins are targeted toward the wealthy. Money is everything to them. The facilities will be a liability for as long as the plan is placed on hold, so they'll make some adjustments before they start losing too much money. The Capitalist Corporations will be forced to stop."

"It won't make Hina sad?"

"She won't let a trick using fake pollution get to her. She's smart enough to see what's really going on. More importantly, let's drive out those filthy SOBs who aren't as smart as her."

Part 14

It was all over and they had returned to that destroyer battleship.

"The next time that busty commander gives us bad intel, I say we make her bow down in apology. How many people does she think died this time?"

"Have you ever heard of the Island Nation's fantastic culture of bondage? We can also have her sit in their 'seiza' style and place a heavy stone slab on her knees."

"Are there any energy drinks around here?"

"Not going to let her sleep tonight, huh? I'm in."

The commander only consolidated the information gathered by her subordinates, so this could not be entirely blamed on Frolaytia. But the exhausted idiots could be unforgiving.

And the busty silver-haired commander did care for her subordinates, so she could not bring herself to get after them too strongly.

"...Don't you forget how you're treating me, you two."

"Oh, there are two things I never, ever forget: convenient loopholes and other people's weaknesses□"

"You're wearing a bunny suit at the next pre-mission briefing. You got that?"

At any rate, Frolaytia placed her long, narrow kiseru in her mouth to distract herself from her irritation.

"We received a few new pieces of data from the support device belonging to the arms dealer Quenser killed and from the destroyed Over Cavitation. The electronic simulation division has finished decrypting it, so we have learned a lot about their organizational structure and their Parasite Plan."

"We still don't get any time off? But I really want to go searching for that legendary maid."

"Frolaytia, please kill him by restricting his sleep and overworking him."

Everyone ignored Quenser's rapid comment.

"I'll omit the specifics and get right to the point: the arms dealer is known as Woodstock. They appear to have begun when an Eastern European gang joined with an engineering group who found no place for them in the Indian peninsula."

"An engineering group?"

"You saw the flying cars that woman going by the name of Dora Blue-Hawaii used, didn't you? Due to the population explosion in that region, the entrance exams and fight for employment have overheated. The people in this group were only lacking in connections, so their skill is real. They were exactly what a criminal organization would have been looking for. That is the group supporting the products used for the Parasite Plan."

Frolaytia sounded exasperated. The look on her face said she wished they had come to the Legitimacy Kingdom for employment.

"Woodstock has a presence in more than just the Hawaii District. All over the world, they have been locating defective Objects from all four world powers and effectively hijacking them through modernization. That is the Parasite Plan. Although now that the plan has been revealed, it seems they have started a disappearing act to avoid mass arrests."

"So is our next mission to attack their headquarters? What a pain in the ass. Aren't there police for that? Do the special forces really have better things to be doing?"

"You might want to hear this first: Woodstock has added or replaced core components to make up for the defects in more than 10 Objects in all. It might be the undercarriage, a main cannon, the radar, the armor, the cockpit's electrical system, or the reactor itself."

"Wait. You don't mean...?"

"Altogether, they have the parts for a brand new Object of their own. The Parasite Plan's true goal was the construction of a cutting-edge Second Generation. The manufacturing process for a whole Object takes years, but this method changes that. Or rather, it doesn't matter if their actions are

discovered even if it does take years. I propose we call it the Gangster. Those arms dealers are apparently waiting for us with a cutting edge Second Generation the likes of which no one has ever seen. That undoubtedly makes this a job for the military.”

Between the Lines 2

Yes.

That’s right.

To be honest, this was a crossroads.

And I really would have preferred for things to go more smoothly. I mean, doesn’t it feel so nice when the government and the people join forces in corruption? Everything is so much easier. There is more than one path to our goal, so there’s no reason to actively choose the harder one.

But the easier path is no longer an option.

Cruel, isn’t it?

But this is not a problem. In fact, this is just the beginning of hell for them.

If spoiling them didn’t work, we’ll just have to get tougher. It’s time to switch from the carrot to the stick. If the government and the people won’t join together in secret, then we the people must crush the useless government. They are the ones that swatted away our outstretched hand, so it’s time to teach them a lesson. Traitors must be harshly punished and we use the fear of that retribution to control both our own people and our enemies.

I really hate doing this.

That’s why I wish they had just accepted the corruption in the first place.

I was trying to keep things peaceful so this wouldn’t happen, but they took a wrong turn at the crossroads. So we must respond accordingly. Let’s show them what the real bad guys can do.

We are Woodstock.

We are the arms dealers who fell the bloody trees of the cursed forest and transform their wood into weapons.

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