

Chapter 3: The Boundary Between Safe Country and Battlefield Country >> Elimination Operation in the Atacama District

Part 1

All of a sudden: bunny girl.

Frolaytia Capistrano raised her voice with rabbit ears swaying.

“Listen up, everyone!!”

The potatoes were obviously going to listen to this. They were far more focused than usual.

They were on the west side of South America, in the battlefield country of the Atacama District. With a general altitude of more than 2000m and some areas reaching 5000m, it was the world’s most unhealthy desert because it even caused altitude sickness.

The person in the amusing costume put on a serious face and attempted to hold a pre-mission briefing.

To repeat, she was a cute bunny.

To provide more detail for the connoisseurs, she was a white bunny with the appropriate fishnet tights. She had the full set of cuffs, collar, and bowtie and she even had a lighter in her cleavage for true authenticity.

“We have details on the enemy group. They are an arms dealer called Woodstock. They started out as an Eastern European gang, but they have grown like an amoeba as they absorb criminal organizations, court-martialed soldiers, engineering groups, cults, and more from territories belonging to all four world powers. We estimate the total number of actual members is greater than 50,000, but we should assume that number increases tenfold if you include their patrons, front groups, corrupt cops they’re paying off, and others receiving indirect benefits. This is not about a battlefield country or a safe country. They have roots everywhere, so assume this is like eavesdropping on your neighbors.”

You could see how serious a matter 50,000 was when you recalled that the bunny commander’s battalion was only about 1000 strong. Since Woodstock was assumed to have a fair number of members with a military background, they had to assume all of those members had been given high-level specialized training.

People were currently being arrested all around the world, but those were either low-level delinquent boys or the aforementioned indirect benefiteres like the presidents of exploitative corporations and the corrupt cops.

The real members were slipping through the cracks and fleeing their respective countries. They

were using land, sea, and air routes to gather here in the Atacama District.

However.

That was not the potatoes' main dish.

“(There’s something up with Frolaytia, so what’s the deal?” whispered Quenser. “(A phantom pregnancy?)”

“(I dunno, but I’m going to sit back and enjoy it,)” replied Heivia. “(But she must not know that bunny color follows the same rules as underwear color. You don’t wear white with tits like that!)”

The 18-year-old commander was actually using her body to apologize, but those idiots had completely forgotten what they demanded she do and ended up attacking her instead. Even though Frolaytia had told them not to forget how they were treating her. The old maintenance lady sighed in exasperation, perhaps because she had seen more than her fair share of people who were uncompromising about the weirdest things back in the good old Island Nation.

The one and only sensible person (who was dressed as a white bunny that could die from loneliness) trembled as she continued.

“Given the size of Woodstock, how deeply they have worked their way into the militaries of the world powers, and most importantly, the decent possibility they have prepared a Second Generation from the unique technology of their Parasite Plan, the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization have gathered their forces for a joint operation. This mission shall be known as Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper. That’s exactly the kind of juvenile name I would expect from the military, but keep in mind that anyone who finds it too embarrassing or annoying to say will be punished.”

“(How is that any worse than you for giving the arms dealer’s Object as straightforward a name as Gangster?)”

“Quenser.”

He was a smart boy, so he immediately fell silent.

“Heh. So we’re getting all buddy-buddy to protect the common feeding ground known as clean war?” said Heivia. “This reminds me a lot of Oceania.”

“Miss Bunny, just the other day, we fought the Capitalist Corporations in the Hawaii District, blew up their Second Generation, and even ruined their Oxyocean Operation,” said Quenser. “I’m fine with a joint operation, but aren’t you worried they’ll suddenly shoot us right in the ass partway through?”

"I have no interest in their grudges or any discord on the battlefield. Take care of yourselves while you're out there. All joint operations and joint exercises have conspiracies going on behind the scenes, so there's always a chance you'll be killed and have it blamed on 'friendly fire' or 'mysterious food poisoning'."

She was as irresponsible as could be.

Besides, the four world powers were enemies who were always staring each other down with Objects. It was not even an issue of being betrayed. They were not supposed to trust each other in the first place.

"Woodstock has apparently long had their headquarters on the bank of a lake in the Atacama Desert. It includes some circular farms created artificially. Their main crop appears to be corn."

The satellite photos showed a series of unnatural green circles lined up in the desert. It was like the reverse of crop circles. A few large Southern European style mansions and some apartments for servants were located near the lake providing a water source. With 50,000 people in an area measuring 2.5 kilometers long and wide, it looked something like a small town, but it still did not stand out much when compared to the scope of the farms as a whole. Those sprawling fields could extend past the horizon and were cared for by scattering agrochemicals from small planes, so this was not too surprising a size for a large farm.

...Then again, their estimates were dependent on technology and the number of personnel could be greatly reduced through use of robots and automation.

Given that, 50,000 people was probably about right.

It was unclear how much money would be lost to food alone on a daily basis, but Woodstock could manage it. Money was power and they used that power to earn the right to wage war.

"Until now, it seems they actually paid taxes with their above-the-board identities and hid themselves in the paperwork, but they must have decided there was no hiding it once they began gathering the individual parts from around the world to build their Object. Our satellites can detect clear oddities now. Wiping them out is going to be a multi-stage operation."

"But...the Over Cavitation in the Hawaii District was a naval Object, wasn't it? Can they really use part of its design in the desert???"

"They apparently had two or three candidates for each part. It was Woodstock that set all this up and I doubt they were dumb enough to go to these lengths if they couldn't even use the Object they were building."

"Okay, one more question: you said we would be 'wiping them out', but aren't there people working

on the farms they used for cover? And wouldn't the arms dealers have brought their ignorant families and mistresses here?"

"Yes, it is possible they brought people they know, but those people must have noticed something was up. They probably just turned a blind eye because they enjoyed the glamorous lifestyle the dirty money bought them."

Quenser had his doubts, so he made a mental note of the issue.

He would have to think about this more during the mission.

Heivia, on the other hand, was the kind of person who would obediently kill when ordered to, so he had a different question.

"What's our final objective? Destroying the Gangster created with their Parasite Plan, or killing the 50,000 people?"

"Grinov Quarterdeck."

Frolaytia Capistrano used the projector to display a middle-aged man's face and personal information on the wall.

"Sex: Male. Age: 43. He was the top of the aforementioned Eastern European gang. He has worked as a criminal planner, a counselor, a novelist, and an organizational restructuring advisor. He has four PhDs and he is known as the current age's most devilish godfather. He supposedly belongs to the Orthodox Church, but he apparently has at least 5 wives. Woodstock is a fusion of several different organizations, but none of that could have happened without his charismatic leadership. It would have fallen apart well before now otherwise. ...After all, even after growing to this size, every single deal they make requires his personal approval. He is a true genius when it comes to creating new crimes and organizations. You have him to thank for the modern forms of fraud and online murder that have spread across the globe. Those have probably caused more damage than the wars he's caused. At the very least, we must hunt him down. The handmade Second Generation can come second."

"..."

"There are a number of unverified legends about Grinov, but according to the intelligence division, the truth is even more than the legends let on. We have heard more than one story about a police station announcing their intent to stamp out organized crime and then finding a bunch of skeletons in the walls of their new office. And it goes without saying whose corpses those were."

This time, they were not up against the military of another world power.

So if they were captured, the war treaties would hold no power. Who could say what cruel and brutal method would be used to execute them.

“And like I said, joint operations always come with conspiracies. Like that incredible accident during the joint exercise in Eastern Europe. During Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper, assume the other powers are trying to take you for a ride no matter how much they grin and rub their hands together. Don’t trust what they say, read all the fine print, and don’t let anyone but me order you to certain doom.”

Part 2

“A new weapon for an irregular operation, huh?”

“This opponent exists outside the clean wars, so there will probably be traps, ambushes, and all sorts of dirty tricks. Yes, good girl. Take your time eating, okay?” At 40 degrees, the desert was truly scorching and Quenser spoke in an odd tone within the maintenance base zone.

He was talking to a military dog.

A trained German shepherd had her face shoved inside a food bowl on the ground. Dog noses were highly prized even in this modern age. Better sensors might be possible if you stubbornly honed your tech, but it was quicker and cheaper to run over to the pet shop.

Quenser was excited about it and Heivia watched from a distance while eating his soap-like rations.

“Are you sure they’re actually that cheap to keep around? Isn’t that thing eating better food than me?”

“My cute Rosa couldn’t possibly eat that garbage. Yes, good girl. Once you’re done eating, it’s time for some exercise to help you digest it. A girl needs to look after her weight after all. Let’s go patrol around the base together.”

“Skinny old Quenser is willingly going out on patrol?”

“What, is that a problem?”

“Sigh. I just don’t get it. Is this like how people go soft once they have a kid?”

“C’mon, Rosa, quit struggling. Think of it as dressing up. You want to look like a proper lady when you head out, don’t you? And this bulletproof jacket will keep you alive.”

“God, this is just disgusting to watch. Don’t let the Princess see you pampering that thing, okay?”

“Why? She was looking after that bear cub back in Eastern Europe.”

“That’s a different issue entirely.”

“?”

Without an energetic shout of “Let’s go, Rosa!”, Quenser ran off with the leash in hand. What was he going to do if he ran into an enemy soldier while patrolling without a gun?

Since this was a joint operation between the four world powers, the maintenance base zones had been partially joined together to create something like a giant residential area. More than just the one Object was stopped there.

It was like a 24/7 festival there, but how much money was being spent every day it continued? Just think about the cost of the basic necessities for thousands of people. Now add on the bloat of government business and the price of all the equipment, weapons, and ammo. War was expensive. And since they were up against a criminal organization instead of a military or a nation, there was no guarantee they could make up for the financial losses even if they won.

“Look, Rosa! That’s a cutting-edge compound lidar sight. By linking together the sights around the maintenance base and command vehicle, the Object can keep a lock on the enemy even if its own sensors lose sight of-...”

He was cut off by a pitiful whine that did not sound at all like a military dog. That must not have been the best conversation topic for a date.

While the maintenance bases were combined, there were still fences between the different world powers. On the Information Alliance side of one such fence, a colossal weapon’s speakers produced a voice.

“Oh ho ho. So we meet again, Legitimacy Kingdom rat.”

“Rosa, don’t bristle up and growl. She’s technically an ally...for now.”

“Oh? What a cute partner you have this time. Fidget, fidget.”

“Is saying ‘fidget, fidget’ out loud one of those things you start doing when you’re an idol?”

“A world-famous idol with G-cups. Get it right. Oh ho ho. An amateur known as a legendary maid has been gathering attention of late, but my status at the top cannot be shaken.”

Was Heivia the one who had said this reminded him of Oceania? An attack on a group outside the clean wars, a joint operation between the four world powers, a desert artificially given greenery, and the Oh Ho Ho G-cup idol. Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper had more than enough to dig up some less-than-pleasant memories.

The Rush had a rapid-fire beam Gatling cannon on either side and a cross-shaped air cushion float. It also had chainsaw-like treads that dug into the ground for emergency dashing.

It was a very different Object from the Princess's, which was all-purpose but could be lacking in individuality. This one had thoroughly strengthened its strong points even if that meant leaving some weak points in, so it had the power to dominate in close-range combat on both land and sea.

"With this huge base set up, they must know we're here."

"Oh ho ho. Shouldn't we assume they were luring us here? Of course, this mission is also being used to get some footage for my new song's music video. I will place a price tag on this battle and make sure I come out on top."

"You aren't worried? This would normally be suicide."

"There is no chance of Grinov alone escaping. His profile says he is their one-and-only godfather and he has never before relied on a body double. I also hear he has killed more of his fellow criminals than police special forces and all so he would get a greater share of the loot. Oh ho ho. He will fear anything that harms his charisma or his brand. Any attempt to defend himself, run away, or keep some insurance will only lower that parameter. Because his many subordinates are watching, he is stuck here. He cannot move. He is the sort of person who insists on approving every last deal they make, after all."

"Everyone loves him, so he can't say what he really thinks, huh? Sounds a lot like being an idol."

"Please do not compare me to some filthy old man."

In the distance, he heard several sounds like sparkling wine corks popping out.

"Oh, excuse me."

A moment later, beams of light shot from the secondary cannons covering the Rush's side like a sea urchin or chestnut burr. They were probably laser beams or rapid-fire beams. Lasers could not be seen from the side, but there was enough sand in the desert air to leave an afterimage as it was burned by the laser.

There were a few explosions in the air and a stir ran through the soldiers on guard duty.

"I just saved your life. Oh ho ho. Those were guerilla mortars."

"Hey, don't kill them. We might be able to get some information out of the Woodstock soldiers."

"Oh ho ho. Don't count on it. These are probably locals forced into this disposable role using debts or drugs."

Even as she said that, Oh Ho Ho showed no mercy at all. She continued to fire over the heads of those in the maintenance base zone to blow away the 4-wheel-drive vehicle the attackers had arrived in and then vaporized those attackers one at a time. Surely this footage would not be used in her new song's music video, right?

She represented a world power.

This was what happened to anyone who provoked the coalition force.

The German shepherd lying bored at Quenser's feet got up and barked. That was unusual for a well-trained military dog. Curious, Quenser followed her gaze.

"Umm, this is Monica, the battlefield idol reporter who can both sing and kill... I don't seem very excited this time? Of course I don't. The Information Alliance has the real deal here. Am I like the guy who throws himself across the room to make the kung fu movie star's kick look good!? We're talking about someone who uses an entire war to gather material for the 3 or 4 minutes of a music video! Why do I have to help advertise the enemy's poster girl!?"

"Oh, crap."

When Quenser noticed, he patted Rosa's head for informing him of the threat and started circling behind some containers piled up nearby.

However...

"Oh ho ho. Why are you sneaking around all of a sudden?"

"Agh, why did you say that!? Why do you idols think being brainless is cute!?"

"Ah."

He was spotted.

His childhood friend named Monica pointed right at him.

“Ahh! Ahhh! Ahhhhh!!!!!!”

She made enough of a fuss that the nearby guards came over and restrained her. Since she could not overpower her suspicious behavior aura with her idol aura, she clearly needed more training.

Quenser was a little confused, but this was his chance.

“Hold it right there, Quenser!! That maid!! Didn’t you agree to seal that maid away forever, servant!?”

“Maid?”

Oh Ho Ho asked a dangerous question, but his only real option was to avoid such distractions and make a quick getaway. No one could ever find out that Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage had worn a bra before Monica ever had!!

Part 3

And so he set out into the scorching 40-degree desert.

“It’s safer out here than in that base with a dangerous idol wandering around.”

“Oh ho ho. You don’t mean me, do you?”

Quenser and the others were in the Atacama Desert.

The Baby Magnum and Rush accompanied them on either side.

No, they were not the only ones on the move. All four world powers were a part of Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper. Another unit of the same size was taking a different route from a different direction to reach the mansions and apartments for the farm owner and workers. They were trying to surround the settlement there. Since they were of the same size, the other unit had a Capitalist Corporations and Faith Organization Object with them.

“(I’m glad I’m with this unit after what happened in Hawaii. If we shared a unit with the Capitalist Corporations, they could shoot us in the back at any moment.)”

“(Yeah, act too cool and the world seems to punish you for it. I think god’s jealous of our badassery sometimes.)”

Everything was covered with fine sand and each step filled them with an unnatural level of

exhaustion.

“What’s with the weird swarms of flies in some areas?”

“If you really want to know, get digging. There’s a criminal organization here, so there might be dismembered corpses buried there.”

The sun beat down on them from overhead. Was it really November? And even if it was, why hadn’t they made this attack at night? They wanted to curse so much about this operation.

Frolaytia explained via radio with obvious exasperation in her voice.

“Because the desert gets cold at night. And the elevation here is greater than 2000m. It gets at least down to freezing.”

“Would you look at that? Now we have a time limit: get back before nightfall or you’ll freeze! All we have are these thin, breathable uniforms! She just threw us out onto the front line while hiding crucial information again!!”

“Hold on! I shouldn’t have to tell you that part. It’s common knowledge.”

“If we freeze, let’s get her to warm us back up with her tits. After all the shit we’ve been through, we have to be entitled to at least that much.”

“Don’t get carried away after the bunny thing, you two.”

The area looked like nothing but empty desert, but that was an illusion created by having every surface colored the same like in a green screen filming studio. There were actually rolling dunes that soldiers could be hiding behind. And the biggest fear in this fine sand desert was the possibility of landmines made of wood or ceramic that their detectors would not find. They had brought dogs along to help with that.

There were small prefab buildings dotting the desert, but they felt no desire to approach those. What were those for? Just like cars abandoned on the side of the road, they seemed like the perfect place to hide a bomb. And even if there were no bombs, those windowless and un-air-conditioned prefab buildings with iron sheet roofs would make the perfect execution spots if you left someone tied up there in the 40-degree desert.

They were not going to approach such a visible threat.

The real issue was the invisible threats. Dogs were known for digging holes and finding food or toys, so there was no fooling their noses with some sand. When they were trained, they could accurately

sniff out explosives hidden in a travel bag at the airport.

“Hey, wouldn’t it be best to let go of the leash and let the dog search freely? A mine goes off even if a dog steps on it, so you’ll be in the lethal range.”

“If you don’t trust her, then you grab a stick and poke the ground ahead of you as you walk. And take the lead so you don’t cause the rest of us any trouble.”

“The anxiety would kill me!!”

“Safety isn’t free. The dog is risking her life to do her job. Quit complaining while still reaping the benefits like an old-fashioned abusive husband. Really, you should apologize to Rosa.”

Not everyone in the unit had a dog with them. There was only one dog per 10 or 20 soldiers.

“Let’s review the process,” said the Princess. “We are acting as obvious bait, so we will move out ahead. We will cause plenty of chaos, so the rest of you shoot the soldiers that flee the hornet’s nest.”

“Oh ho ho. Our weapons would burn them to ashes. This is such a pain thanks to that Grinov Quarterdeck guy. If only we didn’t need an intact corpse to confirm his death.”

“We are monitoring things with the Object cameras and satellites, but that isn’t 100% reliable. We already saw camouflage meant to confuse sensors in Eastern Europe, so make sure to check with the naked eye too.”

It was possible the arms dealers had brought their families and mistresses.

The plan of attack sounded solid, but what were they supposed to do about noncombatants?

“What about their Second Generation Gangster?” asked Quenser.

“We will take care of it. They seem to have replaced one of their farms with an outside maintenance area. Although I imagine that makes it hard to get a baseline reading for the attitude control settings.”

“Oh ho ho. How about we see who can reduce it to scraps first? I am sick of the legendary maid topping all the trending lists. I want an exciting event for my music video footage.”

The Elites were as carnivorous as always. Modern girls were not going to sit around letting people take care of them. Those flowers of the summit were going to descend the mountain themselves.

"There they are. I see the circular farms."

After walking through the desert with unnatural swarms of flies in places, Quenser came to a stop.

Each one had to be around 100 meters across. The characteristic circles of green had formed around sprinklers that resembled horizontal limbo bars. The circles were packed in together to fill the space, creating something like a honeycomb pattern.

The corn fields continued beyond the horizon, so the lake and the buildings were not visible from here. It was all part of the decoy used to hide the arms dealer's true identity. The petit bourgeoisie wanted to ask why they didn't just work toward success as wealthy farmers.

However...

"There it is," reported the Princess via radio. "That isn't a radar-camouflage balloon. I have spotted the Parasite Plan's Gangster. That is definitely Woodstock's Object."

Just the one artificial element rose noticeably up from the horizon.

There was a metal jungle gym of scaffolding and the 50m spherical Object enclosed within. Even at this distance, they could tell it had several thick tubes and cables hooked up to the two main cannons on the right side. Almost like a large rocket waiting to be launched.

"So," said the Princess.

"Oh ho ho. Shall we begin?"

The two Objects moved out ahead. The hunt had finally begun. Lots of sand was blasted into the air, so Quenser and the others coughed as they worked to get a view.

"Cough, ugh. The Parasite Plan means that thing was built from the different parts they sold to the world powers, right?" asked Heivia. "Can't we make some general predictions about how it'll move?"

"I doubt Woodstock ever gave up the plans," said Quenser. "Any assumptions we make could be overturned at any moment. There's no rule saying they have to use every one of the parts and there could always be some brand new parts in the mix."

The two Elites were only meant to destroy the unregistered Object and rattle the enemy soldiers. Shooting those panicked soldiers was left to Heivia and the others, so they could not just watch.

And roads formed even in the open desert. People generally took the shortest route between

important points while avoiding the rocks, quicksand, and their own landmines. Leaving those roads could mean getting lost or getting your tires stuck in the sand, so it would lead to death. Traveling across the desert may have been a lot like in the sea or air where there were optimal routes despite the wide open space.

Frolaytia spoke over the radio.

“The Capitalist Corporations and Faith Organization are attacking as well. But keep in mind that Grinov takes precedence. There’s a reward for whoever puts a bullet through his head, so pray that money bag on legs comes running your way.”

“Man, they’re attacking too soon. They should’ve waited until we’d tightened our circle around them some more. This is like trying to grab a tropical fish out of the ocean.’

“Getting closer wouldn’t make things easier if they made a preemptive attack while our Objects waited. Look, I see some motion on the horizon. Their families and mistresses might be mixed in, so kill the ones in military uniforms and hold up the ones in normal clothing.”

“What if they’re in normal clothes but have a weapon?”

“You pretend to question them from the front while I have Rosa bark at them from the side. Humans can’t disguise their reactions when they’re surprised.”

Quenser remembered hearing that from the professors at his safe country school who waved their pointers around and navigated the border between eccentric and downright insane. Although they had used that principle by shining a bright light on students who were making excuses after forgetting their homework.

“If they carelessly react like a pro, kill them. We can confirm their identities afterwards. We just have to hope one of the bodies has Grinov’s face.”

“So we’re straight up exterminating people now, huh? The world is coming to an end, isn’t it?”

“How many people do you think they killed to build up this pile of treasure here? If you’re still not certain, then try digging around near those swarms of flies.”

While they discussed that, Quenser felt a chill in the middle of the hot desert. Then he felt dampness on his hair and skin. The simple number of 40 degrees had vanished. The effect was similar to a mist shower. The wind may have carried over some of the water from the farms’ sprinklers.

Or so he thought.

However...

“Hm? Wah!?”

It came without warning.

It was a dull color. His vision was cut off by something thick. He initially did not know what the cream-colored thing was. It was created by the desert sand mixing with the moisture in the air.

In other words...

“A-a cloud!? Oh, right! I forgot how high up this is!!”

“You’re kidding, right? And isn’t it rumbling all around here? Don’t tell me these are thunderclouds!!”

An unnatural bolt of lightning ran horizontally from right to left.

The cloud may have gathered static electricity more easily by absorbing it from the sand in the area.

“Ksh!! Kssshhh! Watch out for weather changes! And for sudden - kssshhh!! - lightning strikes!”

“What’s that, Frolaytia!? I can’t hear you!”

“Damn her and her tits. Just telling us to watch out for lightning isn’t going to help much right now! I’m seriously gonna grope those things later...”

An open desert or farm was more dangerous than a golf course, but they could not let go of their guns and knives with a war going on.

“This is why we should use plastic ones. They’re lighter, they don’t rust, and they don’t get you struck by lightning!”

“The lightning will hit you even if you aren’t carrying metal! Heivia, don’t just stand there! Crouch down!”

“What are you supposed to do to avoid lightning? I know you’re not supposed to go near tall trees or the water, but can’t it travel through the ground and hit you even if you get down!?”

They saw flashes of light and heard screams from beyond the thick cloud. There was no telling

whether those were from the world powers or from Woodstock. The natural disaster hit everyone equally.

And Quenser realized something.

“This is bad.”

“Worse than it already is!?”

“The Princess uses a static electricity propulsion device. All this lightning around her is going to mess with her movements! It could even bring her to a complete standstill!!”

“She’s fighting a mystery Second Generation right now, isn’t she?”

“Princess!!”

Quenser shouted into his radio, but it was full of static due to all the interference. He knew the risk, but he could not tell her about it.

“What do we do?”

“Our job hasn’t changed. Heivia, don’t let any of the panicked enemy soldiers escape. We’ll have risked our lives for nothing if Grinov slips right past us!”

Fortunately, the four world powers were working together for Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper. The Princess’s trouble was not guaranteed to turn the tide of the battle. It would not be a problem if the other Objects picked up the slack. The Oh Ho Ho’s Rush used an aircushion system, so it would not have trouble moving in the thundercloud.

But Heivia sounded unhappy as he continued toward the circular farms with assault rifle in hand.

“Can she really rely on them? Don’t forget that there are always conspiracies during joint operations and joint exercises. I’ve heard the horror stories about that Eastern European forest.”

“Stop it. I don’t need to hear this now of all times.”

And then...

“Wah!”

Of all things, Rosa suddenly turned around and dove into Quenser's chest. Unable to support the tomboy's weight and momentum, he toppled backwards and then he cowered down when gunfire rang out beyond the thick curtain. The sand burst quite nearby.

If Rosa had not knocked him down, he might have died.

"That was close! Are we under attack!?"

"Heivia, look where Rosa's eyes are focused and fire!!"

A short burst of gunfire rang out and it must have drawn in the lightning because a bluish-white bolt crackled by from right to left at eye level and accurately pierced the flying bullets.

"Dammit, I have no idea what the right thing to do is!!"

"Sh."

Quenser patted Rosa's head and got up. He and Heivia cautiously walked forward until they found a man in an unfamiliar uniform who had been shot and killed. Even in death, he still held an assault rifle with a wooden stock. The two idiots spoke while looking down at the corpse.

"Wow, Rosa's nose is deadly accurate even with all this going on."

"Let's keep going like this. I wonder what happened with the Princess."

The thunderclouds still left the radio too staticky to use.

While firing the occasional shot with the German shepherd's assistance, they entered an area packed full of tall corn stalks. Rosa's nose was still crucial to their survival. When they occasionally ran across people in Legitimacy Kingdom or Information Alliance uniforms, she remained calm and did not bark, so there was no fear of friendly fire.

"Did you get him?"

"Not yet. So no bonus for you either, huh?"

They used that short exchange to see if Grinov Quarterdeck was still alive and then fanned out across the area while approaching the mansions by the lake. The area felt more like a green field than a desert at this point. All of this was camouflage meant to hide the arms dealers' true identities. Lightning continued shooting by horizontally, but it was focused on the sprinklers that passed by overhead like limbo bars. The metal pipes seemed to function as lightning rods in this case.

“Damn the rich.”

The general atmosphere had changed.

Things were somehow different from the desert full of weird swarms of flies and mystery prefab huts. It was possible the corpses were all abandoned or buried out in the desert to keep their own territory clean.

“He might be using a boat to cross the lake.”

“He can’t escape no matter where he goes. This joint operation gives us way more personnel to work with than normal. So why not let him choose where he wants to die?”

Heivia followed Rosa’s nose to shoot a would-be ambusher and a bolt of lightning reacted to the bullet by running horizontally into the Woodstock soldier’s wound. The soldier’s torso exploded with the sound of a tree trunk splitting vertically.

“The blessing of heaven? Now that’s scary as hell.”

“At least it wasn’t his head. Then we wouldn’t have known if he was Grinov.”

Just then, the German shepherd came to a stop after moving a bit ahead on her leash. She lay flat down on the ground and nearly tripped Quenser.

He did not have time to question it.

This was far greater than the previous lightning strikes. A giant white explosion blew away everything, including the thick storm cloud. The sunlight producing the desert’s scorching 40-degree temperature was back in full force.

What had happened?

What had blown up?

“U-ugh...”

“Ah ha ha. Eh heh heh. The legendary maid is waving my way. How about you come live in my mansion and work for me?”

Heivia had apparently taken a step into heaven, so Quenser ignored him. Quenser spent some time sitting on his butt and fighting his white-scorched vision, but he eventually managed to see the corn

field and an unbelievably clear blue sky.

A crumpled-up hunk of metal had fallen not far away.

When Woodstock's Second Generation Gangster had started moving, it had purged the jungle gym of scaffolding around it and a piece must have rolled over here.

Or so Quenser assumed, but he was wrong.

It was an Object.

Both the Capitalist Corporations and the Faith Organization's prized Second Generations had been blown up and rolled this way.

This was abnormal.

The Parasite Plan had created a patchwork Object like it was Frankenstein's monster. The exact details were unknown and the thundercloud caused by the high elevation had cut off everyone's vision and radar, but still.

"How?"

It looked like Heivia would have trouble accepting reality right away, but there was no time for denial. His teeth chattered and his eyes widened as he lamented the situation.

"The difference in numbers is supposed to be absolute in Object battles. So how did this happen!? Are its main cannons just that monstrous!?"

Quenser clenched his teeth as he viewed the fearsome enemy.

He was scared.

But that was why he could not afford to tremble in silence.

He forced out some words.

"No. It isn't the main cannons we should be afraid of."

"What? What else is there!?"

The Gangster.

Now that he saw it, he could hardly believe it took him this long to notice. It was less than 100 meters away. But instead of screaming, Quenser quietly crouched down, held Rosa in his arms, and hid behind the corn.

It had two main cannons on the right side: one at the top and one at the bottom.

There were giant ring-shaped platforms at various points around the spherical body and low-stability plasma secondary cannons were lined up along those. They were a set. That may have been a way of reducing costs.

The propulsion device appeared to be aircushion floats arranged in an equilateral triangle. They were covered in anti-air laser beam secondary cannons. For some reason, the points of the triangle were also oddly swollen.

But something else was odd too. Something was flying around the Gangster. They may have been something like the air-to-air missiles used by fighter jets, but they also had long main wings much like an airplane.

The arrow-like patterns covering their surface were probably a kind of camouflage.

But not the kind meant to blend into natural scenery.

There were patterns that made something's speed and direction of movement hard to determine. Those flying devices and the Object they surrounded had been drawn into the world of trick art.

It was almost like a flock of small birds or a swarm of bugs. The few dozen devices flew along serpentine paths to wrap around the Object again and again. They were most reminiscent of flies swarming a hunk of rotting meat. The cold machinery somehow made them imagine the stench of death.

The swollen parts at the points of the equilateral triangle may have been efficient launchers for those things.

The trick art camouflage would not work on anyone using electronic or mechanical targeting, but since Object battles came down to a high-level battle of predictions between the Pilot Elites, it might actually be effective there.

"Remote targeting..."

"Hm?"

“Those are unmanned drones with no weapons. With just the Object, you can sometimes break a lock by fleeing to the side or behind, but there is no blind spot if the radar and IR is being sent out from multiple directions. It can lock onto enemies outside of normal radar range using those. Even if the enemy is behind a building or cliff. I believe the tech was developed from the ultra-long-range locking mechanisms used in fighter planes.”

“Objects are covered in anti-air lasers, right? Won't all those be shot down in no time?”

“It doesn't care if they are. As long as they accurately record and report on what direction and distance the attack came from, the Object knows where the enemy is.”

Also, the wreckage of the two destroyed Objects was so full of holes they looked like sponges.

“The Gangster's main cannons must be a coilgun and a rapid-fire beam cannon. And they both scatter a whole bunch of shells over a wide area. You can think of them like giant shotguns. At range, they fan out enough to do damage over a wide area, but once the target has been slowed, it can move right up to them and hit them with its most powerful attack. When the Gangster gets close, the enemy can enter its blind spot by dodging to the sides, so it uses those remote targeting drones to avoid that risk.”

Either way, there were two things he could say for sure.

First, the Gangster's power was real. The coincidental weather change may have helped, but it had accomplished more than it should have when outnumbered 4-to-1.

Second, they were a mere 100 meters from the Gangster. If the Objects clashed again, they would be crushed and turned to mincemeat. It did not really matter if the Objects knew they were there or not.

What was most concerning here?

The rapid-fire beam cannon and coilgun main cannons?

The low-stability plasma cannon and laser beam secondary cannons attached to the spherical body and the triangular floats?

Or the drone formation flying around the Object like flies on rotting meat?

No, it was none of those.

“How did it target the other Objects so accurately in that thick storm cloud?” Quenser cut to the heart of the issue. “The cloud cut off normal vision and IR, radar couldn't get through with

everything electrified, and the rumbling thunder rules out ultrasound. So what was it? Does the Gangster have some special eyes only it can use!?”

“What about those fly-like things swarming around it!?”

“Their remote targeting still uses radar or IR, so that isn’t enough to explain it!!”

What mattered most in a prison meant to hold violent criminals? People might imagine it was thick walls or powerful firearms, but the answer was something else: knowledge of the prisoners’ locations.

The true master of the prison would eliminate all shadows and have a clear view of everything there.

This Object had become a blind killer.

“Listen!”

So it was fortunate that the Gangster contacted them on all bands. Quenser and the others did not care if this was a threat or an attempt at negotiation. Instead of processing what was being said, they had to focus on sneaking away from there. They wanted to be at least 400...no, 500m away.

But did their efforts mean anything at all?

This was a blind killer who could see through any and all forms of camouflage and deception.

“We wish to avoid any unnecessary conflict. As before, we only seek sponsors! All four of you world powers worked with us. If any one of you accepts, we will offer you this Object we created with the Parasite Plan. Its abilities have already been proven through the defeat of your Objects. Our Object is powerful. You can immediately incorporate it into your forces or you can dismantle it and make the technology of the other world powers your own. Do with it as you wish! But you have only the one opportunity. If one of the other world powers beats you to it, you are out of luck!!”

Part 4

The air-conditioned cockpit was cut off from the scorching heat of the desert.

The person narrowing her eyes in displeasure within the Baby Magnum was of course the Princess.

Woodstock’s Object, the Gangster, was indeed powerful. It carried the title of Second Generation, which the Baby Magnum did not. But she was not so sure she wanted it all that badly. The Parasite Plan? If the main cannons, undercarriage, armor, and reactor were all replaced, could you even call it the Baby Magnum any longer? Swapping out parts with no concern for the tech’s original development line sounded as awful as rudely releasing black bass into a clean river because you

wanted to go fishing nearer to home.

She had already seen the people corrupted by these arms dealers in Transylvania and Hawaii.

When you provided power so easily, people would stop thinking and would attempt to resolve everything as quickly as possible using violent means.

They had been bad people from the beginning.

But once they had the extraordinary power of an Object in arm's reach, their delusions could no longer remain delusions.

Some people claimed you were not to blame for the deaths caused by a weapon you sold.

But was that really true?

How many had they killed to maintain their current position in the world? How many missing people would be discovered if you dug through this desert? It might be even more than had died on the battlefields of the clean wars.

Frolaytia spoke over the radio.

"Our answer is no. I will suppress any ridiculous disagreements from the councilors. Blow it away before their bizarre desires grow too much."

"Will do, Frolaytia."

"Princess, blow that thing up for me as an engineer," said the old maintenance lady. "Show them what a true Object can do, not some illegal crap made by criminals."

"Leave it to me."

The Princess breathed out through her shapely nose, controlled her weapons via her goggles, and grabbed the levers in her hands.

But then she noticed something.

The Information Alliance's Second Generation Rush was supposed to be on her side, but it was now aiming a Gatling-style main cannon her way.

“Wha-!?”

She did not even have time to protest.

They had been enemies from the beginning.

And the main cannon was mercilessly fired like a pistol pressed against someone’s temple.

Part 5

The Baby Magnum’s rapid evasive maneuvers were not enough, so more and more of its armor was peeled away while glowing orange.

Quenser breathed in the 40-degree air and gave a shout.

“Rush!? What the hell is wrong with you!?”

“Oh ho ho. Direct any complaints to my commander. She has been a little worried lately that the internet’s recent obsession with the legendary maid will affect my popularity.”

The voice over the radio sounded annoyed with it all, but she did not show any sign of lightening the attack. She had joined forces with the Legitimacy Kingdom because they had a common interest here, but if she found something better, she would prioritize that. It was a very simple form of logic.

(I thought it was suicide to build an Object in their desert hideout and then summon the four world powers here, but I guess this was their plan. Woodstock plans to go into hiding under the protection of whoever pays them the most! If they’re invited in as weapons developers, they’ll be thoroughly hidden. They want to use that to escape!!)

Quenser clenched his teeth.

He had seen plenty of people with this same naïve thought process.

(They think they’re clever enough to outdo the arms dealers where everyone else failed. I thought Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper was supposed to be about joining forces to destroy the evil arms dealer! This is more like a textbook example of investment or gambling addiction!)

Whatever the case, the Information Alliance had agreed to the Gangster’s proposal.

The Princess was having enough trouble simply dodging the attacks coming her way, so she would not be able to attack the Gangster.

And that Object started moving again.

“Any other offers!? Or are you fine with the Information Alliance taking everything for themselves!? In that case, our Object will eventually bare its fangs toward the world once more. But by then it will be further evolved and working toward the Information Alliance’s ends!! Are you sure you want that!?”

“Wait, we already said we’re buying it. Oh ho ho. No one said anything about this being an auction!!”

Anyone who was drawn to the Gangster’s dual main cannons, drones, and mysterious blind killer ability were being asked to work for it. Whoever helped it the most would be given the power created by the Parasite Plan. It was like throwing raw meat into a cage full of ferocious beasts to break the flimsy equilibrium and get them at each other’s throats.

A low rumbling could be heard.

The Capitalist Corporations Wired Rush appeared from beyond the horizon. It was equipped with lots of reels and thick wires and claws used to catch on the enemy Objects and drag them around. The Faith Organization’s Gigaton would stop an enemy with the low-stability plasma cannon on its front and then eject giant circles from either side so they crushed the enemy like meteors. The Information Alliance had both the Rush and the Perfect Range, which had a sniper rifle on either side, both longer than the spherical body itself.

Which ones were for the Gangster’s plan and which ones were against it?

Either way, this would be a chaotic battle with no defined sides.

True hell on earth had shown itself in the South American battlefield country of the Atacama District.

It was not just main cannon blasts that lit up the sky like a planetarium or laser show. The Perfect Range fired the countless secondary cannons attached to the very top of its spherical body like a ship’s wheel or a gear. The Gigaton fired lasers from all across the flat armor panels attached diagonally to its back. And both the Gangster and the Baby Magnum fired low-stability plasma cannons.

With those secondary cannons included, it was enough to blot out the sky.

The Parasite Plan corrupted an Object with individual components and corrupted an army with an Object.

So what was next?

If the flames of war left the Atacama Desert, they might spread across the entire planet.

Part 6

For the time being, not being trampled by the confused and preoccupied giants was top priority for Quenser and the others gasping for breath and crawling across the 40-degree desert.

Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper had completely changed without warning.

“Has the world gone completely insane!?”

Quenser could no longer see Heivia even as he heard the boy shouting. A stray shell fell a short distance away, the circular corn field exploded from below the ground, and dirt poured down to block his view.

He reached out, but he could not find his awful friend’s sleeve.

“Heivia, Heivia!”

(Damn, we’ve been separated!!)

Quenser clicked his tongue.

This meant a change of plans.

“Come here, Rosa! I won’t let you die here!!”

The woof and the tug on the leash were all he could rely on.

Like a proper arms dealer, Woodstock had driven cracks through the coalition force just by making a business proposal.

While chunks of dirt larger than light vehicles flew, Quenser grabbed his radio.

“Frolaytia! What’s our plan now!?! What side are we on!?”

“We do not negotiate with criminals!! Support the Princess and get us through this! Also, the Legitimacy Kingdom has sent in the Escalibor to join her. Don’t you die out there!!”

That was a relief to hear.

If he had been told to grin and shake hands with the arms dealers, he might have faked his death and deserted.

“Princess! You can manually control the reactor, right? If things get really bad, open valves 3, 8, and 12!!”

“What kind of power up is that supposed to be? It would overload the system and the secondary cannons would explode.”

“Who cares if those tiny secondary cannons blow up in a battle between Objects? Use that to create a big flashy explosion when you take a light hit. Then you can play dead until the backup Object arrives!”

“Quenser, you need to get out of here. No one will notice if you sneak away with all this going on.”

“...”

“You are our trump card. Hiding you below the table is far more useful than playing dead. We can’t afford to lose you.”

“Sorry about this!!”

“I expect you to find a way to strike back at them.”

The Baby Magnum sent more power than necessary to its static electricity propulsion device and filled the air with a cloud of dust mixed with crackling electricity.

He could not waste the chance she was giving him.

He crouched low and worked his brain.

This could not have happened naturally.

The economic and financial situation had been set up to manipulate people through profit and loss.

Grinov Quarterdeck.

This looked like a chaotic brawl between multiple Objects, but he decided to assume the overall

situation would work in Woodstock's favor. Quenser needed to start by taking the first step. He did not want to be hit by a stray shell. Having an Object lock onto him was out of the question, but the circular farms were also filled with 50,000 soldiers. A lot of those had been taken out on the way here, but he doubted that was all of them.

Moving too far away was not an option. There was only so far he could travel by foot and, if he moved out into the desert alone, the enemy soldiers would spot him and surround him.

He needed a safer option.

He needed somewhere with lots of things he could hide in or behind.

And what area would be safe from being trampled or shot by the Objects?

(That's it.)

Quenser raised his sandy head.

(The Southern European mansions where Woodstock lives! That's a small town housing 50,000 soldiers. And they were recently gathered from around the world, so they won't recognize each other!! If I remove my uniform, they won't know I'm not one of them!)

With the leash in hand, he walked through the tall corn and poked his head out of the dust cloud. He heard some of the corn stalks rustling on the way, but he had no way of knowing if that was an enemy or ally wandering the field.

He crossed a few of those circular farms and approached the lake.

Breaks in the dust cloud gave him glimpses of the Southern European mansions that looked out of place in the desert, but he was certain they would be surrounded by cameras and sensors.

He needed camouflage.

He needed to transform into one of the people who lived there.

He changed his destination to one of the prefab huts he had seen in the gaps between circular corn fields. Unlike the ones dotting the desert, these ones had air-conditioning units sitting outside. When he peeked in through the window, he found this one was a combination of a storeroom and a rest area. The door was locked, but he blew off the entire knob with a plastic explosive the size of his fingertip. With the Objects clashing not all that far away, he doubted anyone would investigate such a small blast.

“Come here, Rosa. It can’t be fun having all that dirt on you. Here, I’ll brush it off of you.”

The inside of the cramped building was quite humid, so the air-conditioning must have been off.

The German shepherd whined sweetly and rubbed up against him. He grabbed a towel from the table, balled it up in his hand, removed her bulletproof jacket, and wiped the dirt off of her fur. Either because he was cleaning her or because he had removed the heavy jacket, Rosa wagged her tail happily. He looked around while looking after her.

He initially only saw some simple tea and pasta-style cup noodles, but when he opened the small box on the table, he found it stuffed full of rings and necklaces bearing diamonds and emeralds. The quality of the everyday items and the valuables was clearly out of the ordinary. He opened another box to find a luxury makeup set likely used to prevent sunburns. As a criminal organization, they were probably simply distributing their assets as something other than cash, but instead of careless, this felt more like they were so oversaturated with treasure that it had found its way out here. Just how rich were they?

He considered grabbing a few souvenirs, but he had only just been swallowed up by that thundercloud. He wanted to avoid receiving some divine punishment for trying to swipe these treasures.

He focused only on survival.

And for that, he had to change clothes.

He could take on any role as long as he changed out of his Legitimacy Kingdom uniform.

He was hoping for a farmer’s clothes or a work jumpsuit, but...

“Man, you can find these anywhere, can’t you? Well, they are using fancy mansions for their headquarters.”

He reached for the hanger on the wall and spread out the outfit it carried.

A true man would always choose the maid uniform.

His decision was greatly influenced by the luxury makeup set he had found among Woodstock’s treasures. It felt a little weird so soon after the incident with Hina Liqueurball, but the set contained high-end collagen gel. With production halted, the price of the remaining stock had to be skyrocketing. After using that for the foundation and adding some makeup on top, he just had to put on the maid uniform to complete Legendary Maid Quensette.

“Whew, this is pretty thick and heavy-duty. Is it for actual work?”

Rosa only tilted her head when he muttered to himself, so despite being a girl, she must not have known much about maid uniforms. Speaking of Rosa, he could not leave her equipped with collar, leash, bulletproof jacket, camera, and communicator. That was far too much Legitimacy Kingdom military equipment. He started by removing everything except the bulletproof jacket and stuffing it, his uniform, and his backpack in a garbage bag for fallen leaves. Digging a hole and burying it would have left a noticeable mark where he filled in the hole, so he instead stuffed the bag in the vent at the bottom of the foundation below the prefab hut.

Quensette, who grew bolder while crossdressing, looked around.

(Now, what to do about Rosa?)

Once back in the hut, he found a few bags of pet food on the shelves. The food was for large dogs and the packaging advertised how it kept teeth sharp and jaws strong. Rosa was a gourmet, so she stubbornly refused to eat the unnecessarily hard food.

But unlike in the mansions or apartments, the presence of food in a hut like this suggested they kept quite a few dogs here. He was honestly a bit worried about that. If they only kept some other breed, like Dobermans, a German shepherd like Rosa would stick out like a sore thumb. And it could still be a problem even if it was not that extreme. He did not know how many dogs they had, but it had to be fewer than the 50,000 soldiers and their families. The odds were good Rosa would arouse more suspicion than Quenser.

(Could I release her here?)

A military dog like Rosa had much stronger legs than Quenser and she could locate and avoid the mines or other traps hidden in the ground. If he released her, she would likely arrive back in the maintenance base zone pretty quickly. If he removed her collar and leash, Woodstock would have no way of knowing she was not just a stray or a pet. As long as she did not attack them, there was little chance of them shooting her even if they saw her.

“Rosa.”

She responded with a gentle woof.

She must have been in a good mood because her tail was innocently wagging.

“Rosa, you can go now. You’ll be safe then. Go, Rosa!!”

But the dog remained sitting at his feet. He was pretty sure she would follow him at a distance even if he tried to drive her away. So she could protect him while he was all alone and unarmed in enemy

territory.

(Man, she's such a good girl.)

Quenser decided to accept the risk.

He pulled a Woodstock collar and leash from the shelf and disguised Rosa with them.

"Rosa, don't make a fuss, okay? Don't bite anyone until I give the go ahead, even if they hit me."

She woofed in response again, but had his instructions really gotten through to that earnest lady who would follow three steps behind him even in the modern age?

He had no weapons and no way of contacting anyone in the middle of enemy territory, so trying to hide some Legitimacy Kingdom equipment on his person could easily mean his death. If it was discovered, he would either be killed on the spot or tortured since the war treaties held no power here. He just had to remember the strange swarms of flies and the mystery huts out in the desert beyond the circular farms. If he was in need of a gun or bomb, he was already in a situation where he would be surrounded and brutally executed. He had to stay on the attack as he worked his way further in.

(Grinov.)

Quenser's long maid skirt fluttered as he and Rosa left the prefab hut.

(Grinov Quarterdeck! I have to capture their leader and bring an end to this ridiculous business negotiation that has the world powers so rattled!)

He might also find the plans and specifications for Woodstock's Second Generation Gangster, but ending the business deal took precedence. At the moment, they only had the verbal promise of the Gangster's Elite. That did not guarantee Grinov Quarterdeck himself would approve it. It was unknown what form that approval took, but it was probably done through some kind of electronic device. For Quenser, the best option was to use Grinov's computer to stop the business deal even if it meant pretending to be Grinov himself.

His destination was beyond the corn fields. He traveled on foot while avoiding the remains of a few collapsed grain silos and a toppled-over tractor that looked self-driving. He was headed for the main Southern European mansion by the large lake that acted as a water supply. There was also a section full of identical apartments arranged like a library's bookcases, but he was only interested in finding Grinov Quarterdeck. After going to the trouble of donning camouflage to slip past the cameras and sensors, he had no reason not to go for the main building.

The circular farms were in utter chaos, but things changed the closer he got to the lake. It was a

subtle thing, but the cacophony of clashing Objects felt more distant. It was like viewing it through a pane of glass or watching a fire on the other side of a river.

Different rules applied here.

Once he was quite close to the mansion, he heard a rustling in the corn stalks right next to him.

Acting weirdly courageous was the wrong move here.

“Kyaah!?”

He made sure to shriek and did not forget to cower down. All while holding Rosa like a stuffed animal so she would not jump out at whoever it was.

It was two men in unfamiliar military uniforms.

They wore gold necklaces, emerald rings, and other things no actual soldier would be wearing.

“Pardon us, lady. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“If you’re taking shelter, then head further in. But where are you from, señorita? I get wanting to have your loved ones around, but I don’t get bringing them to a battlefield country.”

One of the swarthy maintenance soldiers reached out a hand, but Quenser did not move any closer and only squeezed Rosa’s neck in his arms. He made sure to turn a frightened look toward the men’s guns and knives instead of their faces.

The man was not wearing gloves.

The large gem in his pure gold ring glittered in the bright sunlight.

The chest and butt were not the only areas of concern. Due to differences in subcutaneous fat, a man and a woman’s palm could feel quite different. He had tried to mask those differences with the collagen gel, but the fingers were a risk due to the concentration of peripheral nerves. He remembered this causing a lot of disappointment back at the cultural festival café.

He slowly stood up while acting frightened and used that time to analyze the maintenance soldiers’ intonation.

(I was expecting the kind of Central and South American Latinos you would hear talking about nachos and jalapenos, but they end their words surprisingly crisply. So is this less Castilian and

more Eastern Slavic?)

The soldiers had apparently gathered from all around the world, but language habits could be surprisingly infectious. When taking a trip within your own country, it was not uncommon to find yourself slipping into the local accent after just a few days. If he wanted to work his way deeper in, it was worth checking on these things.

An identical tone sounded from both the maintenance soldiers' radios.

"Lady, you need to get to the mansion instead of the apartments! But don't go underground. The water purification plant was taken out and the whole place might be flooded!!"

"Sorry we can't escort you to safety. Let's go, Ramon! We've got work to do!!"

Quenser sighed while watching the two men run off in a different direction.

(Did I act too scared? I should've listened longer to learn more about how things are in Woodstock and what might rub them the wrong way.)

He started thinking like the handsome lead of a spy movie, but that was a bad habit for Quensette, who grew bolder when crossdressing. And he only started thinking like that after the danger had passed. If he had actually tried it and extended the conversation, they would likely have noticed something was off in a flash.

Anyway...

"Let's go, Rosa. We have permission to go to the mansion."

She gave a reassuring bark.

After continuing toward the largest mansion, he saw more noncombatants on their way there: a girl in a sailor uniform, an old woman in a nun habit, and a house-husband with a small child in tow. There were also some girls in maid uniforms. It looked like there were different designs for farm work and indoor cleaning.

They were all carrying suspicious-looking boxes and bags, so they were likely carrying whatever their criminal family members had given them without knowing what was inside. Did they contain precious metals or weapons and ammo?

(I can't believe this. There's even more than Frolaytia predicted.)

If they had just sent the Objects in under the assumption that “They’re all bad guys! Yahoo!”, the debriefing might have been enough to make him vomit. Had this been a lucky mistake or a joke come true?

As expected, there was no sign of any corpses around here.

Not even those global sons of bitches must have wanted their families to see that.

He had been worried about traps like mines at first, but it was looking more and more like that would not be an issue. Even if there were mines, they would not be within the circular farms. The soldiers would not want to bury mines somewhere their family or friends might be walking.

There was a maintenance soldier with a gold bracelet at the gate, but he was not asking for an ID or a biometric scan. He was only doing a simple pat down over the clothes, but he was letting most of the women and girls go right through without that.

From here, Quenser could tell the mansion had a stereotypically symmetrical design, but a garage appeared to have been added later. There was an area sticking out unnaturally on the right side. The number of windows suggested it was a three-story building, but there might be some attic and basement rooms added on as well.

It looked quite fancy from the outside.

They may have gotten the help of a famous architect for the design. Whether they used drugs or sex workers to convince the architect was the only real question there.

Quenser let the old nun go through first and then passed through the gate to reach the rose garden. It felt a lot cooler than when he was in the circular farms. Everything felt refreshing here, so it was easy to forget this was the middle of the desert. He could probably head right into the mansion now, but a small concern occurred to him.

If his cover was blown, he was as good as dead, so every little thing felt like handling unexploded ordnance. At the same time, he could not ask anyone else for help. He had to figure it all out himself.

In other words...

(Oh, no. I never checked to see if they allow dogs inside the house here.)

Those family rules could be the most troublesome. You could not research them in advance, but getting them wrong really made you stand out. Instead of going with the flow, Quenser walked through the rose garden to take a look around. He spotted a stable for livestock at one end of the property. Based on the excited neighing he heard in response to the distant rumbling and explosions, it likely held horses. He did not see any dogs around, even though there had to be quite a

few of them here based on the dog food in that prefab hut.

(There don't seem to be stables for pigs or cows either. What do I do? Are the more practical ones located off the property?)

Quenser had no intention of letting Rosa go after coming this far. He needed to come up with some method.

Then the guard with the gold bracelet gestured at him and spoke in a deep voice.

"Girl, hurry!!"

"Is there a doctor in the house?"

Quenser spoke in a coquettish voice quieter than if someone had just dumped icy water over his head. He could tell he was gradually getting into the role. Tearful eyes and an upturned glance were Quensette's greatest weapons.

"This pup protected me from some falling furniture. She's normally running all around everywhere, but she doesn't have any energy since then. She won't eat her food either. Oh, whatever am I supposed to do!?"

"Is she hurt? Like dragging a leg or something?"

"I don't know. Ohh, I just don't know. This is all my fault for being so slow!!"

Dogs and cats were living creatures, so he had heard they would come down with PTSD when hiding in a bomb shelter over the course of a long bombing campaign. Rosa was not eating the food because it was not what she was used to, but that was fine as long as it fit what Quenser was saying.

Also, psychological wounds were invisible and intangible. The maintenance soldier could not make a judgment right here and now.

There was more rumbling in the distance.

"Argh, just come here!"

"Um, what about her!?"

"She can come with us! ...Go ask Doctor Sandra about it later. But don't take the dog into the examining room!"

He had expected the big boss's base to have a medic or other doctor. In an isolated hideout, you could not use the standard infrastructure, so a simple case of appendicitis or a cavity could mean a crisis. They could not exactly pick up the phone and call an ambulance.

The main entrance's doorknob appeared to be solid gold instead of brass.

The pleasant chill of air-conditioning welcomed them inside.

Based on the mansion's size, they may have had the kind of industrial model used for high-rise buildings.

Once he and the dog were inside the Southern European mansion, he found it to be quite spacious. It had an open floorplan, but that made the entrance hall look so large Quenser felt it had to seem lonely most of the time. There were a lot of paintings, sculptures, and other pieces of artwork and antiques, but were those the result of Grinov's taste or simply a desire to distribute their assets in a readily liquidable form?

They were doing well enough to support 50,000 direct members and their families. Thinking of this as the headquarters of an international corporation, this may have been relatively restrained.

There was no scent of death here.

But that was not a natural thing. It felt more like antiseptic had been sprayed around.

How many deaths had they caused to distance themselves from death?

(Now, then.)

"We are safe inside this mansion! The Objects will always do what benefits us. Victory will come to us if we wait!!"

That announcement was probably more about preventing a panic than giving an actual evacuation plan. Quenser pulled on the leash and left the hall while glancing back at the noncombatants in a sailor uniform or nun habit who had stopped to listen to the DJ soldier.

The mansion itself was symmetrical and it looked like an E when viewed from above. The main hall was at the intersection between the vertical line and the middle horizontal line and a hallway extended back from there. The view from outside suggested that led to the garage. That was all he knew and he was not even certain how many rooms there were per floor.

Although the design of the doors was enough to tell the normal rooms from the supply closets and storerooms.

(Hm? Newspaper and magazine clippings???)

He tilted his head at the clippings he saw pasted on a door, but he did not have time to read through them. A patrolling maintenance soldier could show up in this hallway at any time.

“First I need a weapon.”

The storerooms were big enough to walk around in. In addition to cleaning supplies and a first aid kit, he found money counters and cash from various parts of the world hastily bound with rubber bands. He could have taken some of them with him, but given their criminal origins, the bank might freeze his account if he tried to deposit them without doing a bit of laundering first. He decided it was best not to touch them. There were hammers and saws in the tool boxes, but there was no explaining those if they were discovered hidden in his skirt. He could not forget that blowing his cover meant death.

“What are these? Ingots???”

The metal bars lying around did not appear to be gold or silver. They were printed with the text “Pt, 99.99%”. If that was true, then these were platinum. With a density of 21.4, enough to fill a 1-liter carton of milk would weigh 21.4kg. He traced his finger across that metal which was too heavy to easily lift in one hand.

(No, is this an imitation alloy given a similar weight? But why? I thought the police had developed these to use as a decoy ransom.)

He doubted Woodstock had simply been fooled.

Were they analyzing the enemy’s tech to research ways to tell the difference, or were they used to fool other criminal organizations?

“Did they use mechanical alloying? Well, that’s not important.”

He could not wield something this heavy as a weapon. He was more likely to drop it on his little toe.

What would pack a punch but not raise any eyebrows if he carried it around? After some thought, he selected the item he wanted.

(It can’t be a blade or a blunt object. So does that leave something electric?)

The heating elements for bug zappers had a surprisingly high voltage. With the farms nearby, they must have suffered from a lot of mosquitos and flies because there was quiet a selection. There was the kind that hung from the eaves and there was a portable vacuum that linked with a bug zapper

box with the heating element wrapped around it, but Quenser was focused on the electric bug sprayer you wore around the neck. It was a camping supply that ran on a lithium battery, but he removed the cover, exposed the wiring, made some modifications so two metal clips acted as electrodes, and placed the cover back on.

(The standard amount would be 20,000 volts, I think. To be honest, grabbing a glass ashtray and conking them on the head might be a faster way to knock someone out at this range.)

It was small for a stun gun and there were ridiculous models out there that were more than 200 times as powerful.

Still, when he activated it as a test, Rosa looked up in surprise at a distinctive sound a bit different from the buzzing of bug wings. She was well trained, but the unfamiliar could still startle her.

A stun gun was not all that special a weapon.

The specifics will be omitted here, but you can see how ubiquitous the necessary parts are if you consider what handheld products can produce a lot of electricity at once. Of course, if you lack the proper knowledge, you are liable to shock yourself or blow up the battery, so do not try this at home. A plastic device smaller than a pack of cigarettes was now creating bluish-white sparks. What mattered now was a camouflaged weapon, not a powerful one.

Instead of hiding it in his pocket, Quenser placed the string around his neck to wear it as originally intended.

“Let’s go, Rosa. Time to search the place.”

They walked back out into the hallway.

Leaving the group and acting alone was frightening. It was not surprising he wanted the dog and a weapon to protect him.

“Sandra? Doctor Sandra?”

He was of course really looking for Grinov Quarterdeck. He had not forgotten that.

But as insurance in case he was discovered, he quietly called out the name of the doctor he had been told about while quietly knocking on and trying each of the doors he came across. This was not the time to press against the walls and hide on the ceiling like a ninja. The trick to staying alive was to limit his actions to ones he could explain if he was found.

Only about half the doors were locked.

This was Woodstock's home base. That seemed careless for the headquarters of an international corporation of 50,000, but it felt overly strict for a home.

He saw a game room with a pool table and a dart board, a jacuzzi with a home theater system, and a bar with plenty of vodka bottles, but no sign of any people.

There were still precious metals and suspicious stacks of cash lying around, but he was more interested in the newspaper and magazine clippings. They were everywhere - in scrapbooks or on corkboards.

(An Eastern European forest, 30,000 missing people, and a joint military exercise?)

What was all that about? Were they connected to some previous job as an arms dealer?

There were also some things like an oddly scorched plastic doll and a toy plane with broken wings. That felt strange when Woodstock had all their jewels and gold bars just lying around.

However...

(None of that is going to tell me where Grinov is.)

Quenser made a mental note of what he had seen and got back to his main objective.

He still had a powerful weapon.

(The best spot would be...here, I guess. As the master of the mansion, Grinov would want the best seat in every room. I can look at the angle of the TV, the location of the air-conditioning vent, and the position of any plants that might block the view. Now what other items are in here?)

"Rosa. Sniff this chair and...oh, I know. The stock of this hunting rifle."

After receiving a woof in response, he had her smell the most luxurious seat at the bar which had so many cruel items around it.

Rosa was a German shepherd and she could do the work of a police hound as well as a combat canine. Even if the human eye could not see anything, her nose could pick up the trail.

...Grinov had an electric scale to measure out the powder and various small knives for carving out the wooden stock, but what was he planning to shoot with that hunting rifle out in the empty desert? Quenser really hoped it was not a bipedal mammal known for wearing clothing.

Quenser started down the hallway with Rosa leading the way while occasionally moving her nose to the floor. There was apparently a small stairway other than the one in the main hall and they used that to reach the third floor and approach one door in particular.

“Doctor Sandra, are you in here...?”

When Quenser whispered the name of someone he knew was not there and quietly knocked on the center of the door, he heard a deep noise from within.

The scent of the mansion’s master had led him here.

That had to be Grinov Quarterdeck.

(...)

Quenser removed the handmade stun gun from around his neck and glanced over at a flower pot decorating the hallway. Even with the door shut tight, there was enough of a gap to slip a piece of paper underneath. If he poured out the flower pot’s water and used the stun gun on it, he could send the electrical shock past the door. Even so, he was at a disadvantage here. He could hit the man if he casually grabbed the door to open it, but the man could always stay away from the door, pull a magnum from a desk drawer, and fire into the center of the door. Plus, there might be more than one person in the room. And it was all for naught if the man was wearing waterproof military boots. 20,000 volts might sound like a lot, but it was a far cry from a train’s high-voltage line.

Quenser could not afford to thoughtlessly wait around for the man to do something.

Several Objects were fighting a meaningless battle at this very moment and lots of soldiers had to be fleeing on the ground below them. No, in the worst case, those soldiers might be killing each other. Heivia, Myonri, and even the Princess. With every second that passed, someone he knew could be having their life snuffed out.

He had to end this as quickly as possible.

Now was the time for decisive action.

(G-...)

The doorknob (which appeared to be pure gold) shook.

It turned.

And the door slowly opened inwards.

“Go, Rosa! Get in there!!”

Quenser threw the flower pot’s water at the door and zapped the floor with his stun gun.

And to make sure the collapsing body did not block the door, he half-tackled the door with his shoulder.

He let go of the leash and sent the dog in first.

Once Rosa started moving, she did not bark at all until she had dealt with her target.

“Kh.”

Quenser was searching the mansion on the pretext of finding Doctor Sandra. If Grinov simply said “she’s not here”, that was that. Using that pretext was the safer option, but he would never get into the room that way.

Luckily, he heard no gunfire or yelling.

He only heard a gentle woof that would not let the rest of the mansion know anything was wrong.

The battle was over.

“What, was there no one else in there?”

Dogs did not have the ability to point, so Rosa simply kept her jaws clamped down on a large man collapsed on the floor.

That seemed to settle it.

“So this is Grinov. Grinov Quarterdeck.”

The stun gun had taken down a large white man with a Santa-like beard and short hair. He was muscular and his bare arms had a few notable tattoos.

He supposedly had his origins in an Eastern European gang, but that permafrost fashion must not have been bearable in South America. He still wore the fancy slacks, but he had removed the coat and tie and the white shirt’s sleeves were rolled up.

Quenser stepped over the collapsed man to enter the room and gave a quick pat of the German shepherd's head when her attention shifted from Grinov to him.

"Is this Grinov's office?"

There was a large desk and lots of thick law and economics books. Quenser ignored the usual money counters, jewels, and credit cards and passports held together with rubber bands, but there was also weapon concept art and 3D-printed Object weapon models. There was a flat-screen monitor on the desk and the tower computer itself was forcibly stuffed in the space for the chair. It looked like a fairly old model given how much money had been spent on the room. There was no sign of any tablets or AI speakers either.

Everything here had been realized and sent to the battlefield.

Quenser had worked with the military and gradually studied to be a designer while getting yelled at, so his efforts felt almost worthless when he saw all this. By using the underhanded methods of the Parasite Plan and the Gangster, this man had skipped past all that work to make the dream a reality.

How much money and treasure had he seen in this mansion?

Grinov Quarterdeck had everything Quenser wanted from his goal of outdoing the nobles as a commoner. And he had used a method the clever boy had never even considered.

"A dumbphone..."

Quenser had to smile bitterly when he picked up the mobile device sitting on the desk. Only those in the medical field used these anymore.

As an arms dealer, Grinov may have disliked the "extra features" of modern smartphones, like voice commands that could be recording at any time and sent the data to an external server or like mysterious data collection scripts embedded in the base OS.

Quenser's nose detected the scent of old paper and glue.

Overall, it reminded him of a lawyer or accountant's office.

There were some gaps in the bookcases on the wall. That gave room for doors on a wall not bordering the hallway. Opening those revealed a simple bathroom and a nap room. There was nowhere anyone else could be hiding.

"Kh..."

He heard an odd groan.

The shock had only been 20,000 volts. Unlike in movies or dramas, a real stun gun was not guaranteed to knock someone cleanly out. You should only expect them to keep someone immobile for 30 seconds to a minute.

Grinov's right arm shot up.

Quenser spotted the unique dull glint of metal there.

"Sic him, Rosa!"

Quenser quickly gave a command, but the bearded man was fast.

He did not even hesitate to cut the side of his own neck with a knife.

Quenser had his own situation to worry about.

All weapon deals required approval from Grinov as their big boss. That could be used to end the verbal promise on the battlefield and restore order to the chaos there. That was the plan anyway.

"Dammit, Grinov!!"

The German shepherd finally managed to bite the godfather's right wrist and tear the blade from his grasp, but it was too late. Quenser quickly grabbed a piece of weapon concept art from the table, thought better of it, grabbed a design idea for a tattoo instead, and ran over. Not even the best military dog could treat a wounded person. A human was needed to roll up the thin paper and press it to the wound on the side of the man's neck.

"Don't die yet. At least wait until you've told me how to approve and reject deals first!!"

By stopping the bleeding, Quenser could at least stop the man from "quitting while he was ahead". But unless he stabilized the man's vital signs, he could not force any information out of him using violence. It was all over if Grinov died.

(Dammit, he took the initiative from me!!)

After making sure the bleeding had stopped, Quenser wrapped some rubber around the paper to hold it in place and left Grinov in Rosa's care. Getting anything out of the man would be difficult, so he had to gather what information he could on his own.

The dog stood on the man's back while he lay face down.

Meanwhile, Quenser drew the curtains and both closed and locked the door to the hallway. He grabbed the lamp from the ebony desk and used the power cord to tie the man's hands behind his back to prevent a second suicide attempt.

The middle-aged man with the distinctive beard forcibly twisted around to get a look at Quenser while speaking with a bit of a slur in his voice.

"Oh, what's this? Having the dog take me in the ass?"

"Rosa's a girl, you dumbass. And she's too good for you anyway."

For being so muscular and having so many tattoos across his body, he spoke with a surprisingly calm tone.

He may have run the arms dealer organization using clever economic principles in addition to simple violence.

"You are dead, I hope you know. No matter what you try, you will not leave here alive. My organization uses cars for its executions. You will be stripped naked, both hands will be tied to the back of the car, lighter fluid will be poured over your foolish little head, and you will be set ablaze. Of course, no one lives to see the flames fade."

"Rosa, if you're going to bite anything off, make it just the one ear. Don't kill him yet."

This was a criminal field where the war treaties did not apply.

He might have captured Grinov, but that was a temporary thing and the man's soldiers would act once they noticed something was amiss. This room would be surrounded and there was no hope of winning then. What would happen once they broke down the door and dragged Quenser outside?

He refused to picture the rest of the scene and made sure not to let his imagination get the better of him.

This man was an expert when it came to these things, so he would see through any bluff Quenser tried to make. That was why the falsely polite man maintained his calm demeanor despite the wound to his neck cut and the dog holding him to the floor.

(Don't lose focus. Do what needs to be done.)

Grinov's approval was needed for all deals.

Quenser's goal was to capture the top of Woodstock and use the computer or paperwork to end the business deal being made with a verbal promise. The Gangster was enough of a threat on its own, so they did not need the four world powers fighting each other here.

The enemy was intentionally using a method outside the norm to rattle them.

Quenser had saved his own life with a similar approach using his plastic explosives, so he understood. If they were going to the trouble of using this nonstandard method, it meant they were not confident of their ability to defeat so many Objects with just that mystery Second Generation.

So what did he need?

(The computer seems the most likely.)

That should contain all the contract formats used by Woodstock in its arms dealing. That would include the forms for annulling or freezing a deal.

Grinov was not needed to create the form. His job was just to approve it and that should only need his computer and account. Although it might ask for an electronic signature. At any rate, if Quenser sent the four world powers an electronic form saying Woodstock would not give them the Gangster, they would at least stop their fruitless popularity contest of a battle over it.

Quenser opened the heavy desk drawer, pulled out some jewels, a cigar case, and a scrapbook detailing an accident during a joint military exercise, placed them all on the desk, and found a few cables and what looked like an earphone. There was no obvious biometric scanner to read the veins in the palm or the iris of the eye.

(An earphone, huh?)

The shape of the inner ear could also be used for biometric identification. Back at his safe country school, he had heard of a method that sent out a tone and identified people based on how it was reflected back inside their ear.

He had to try everything he could.

He was the one who had tied him up, but Quenser lacked the strength and the desire to princess carry the bearded man. He tossed out that nightmarish option and instead slid him over in front of the computer. After seating the man in the chair with his hands still tied behind him, Grinov groaned at the somewhat painful position.

“Trying biometric identification? Try my fingerprint and eye if you like. I am curious to see what happens when none of it works.”

“...”

With his hands tied behind his back, he could only shake his head which was not enough to keep the earphone out.

Quenser tried measuring the shape of the man’s inner ear using the earphone connected to the computer with a cable.

“Error?”

“We are a Woodstock, a criminal organization.”

Quenser tried the same thing again, but no luck.

Trying too many times could cause the ID screen itself to lock up.

Grinov gave a snort of laughter.

“We always consider the possibility of attack. Were you satisfied when you found the same face in the photo you were shown? Plastic surgery is enough to-...”

Quenser did not even bother listening as he dug through the drawers and stuck a communication cable into a slot on the locked computer.

“...Wait.”

He plugged the other end into a piece of plastic smaller than a pack of cigarettes.

After connecting the electric bug sprayer he had used as a stun gun, he tossed the device onto the desk.

“Wait, what are you doing!?”

“You don’t have a tablet or an AI speaker. You intentionally use an outdated computer so you can run a script of yours to keep it from gathering any data, don’t you? These days, everything connects to the internet. In the Information Alliance, I hear even their bidet toilets are monitoring everything with IoT functionality. Now, what about this? You intentionally limited the connections to this precious computer, but don’t you think it’ll be leaking data like crazy with this wireless antenna

attached? It might be hard to tell since it's invisible, but it's sending its signal in every direction."

"What!?"

"So what's on here? A list of clients? Plans for new weapons? A map of all your secret transport routes? Or maybe photos of your family living back in a safe country, oblivious to these illegal dealings? I don't care if it's a mistress, an ex, or your first love from elementary school. Did you really bring everyone you care about to this mansion? The intelligence division isn't exactly known for their mercy. If they find out you're friends with someone, it doesn't matter which of the world powers they're living in; masked men will cross whatever borders they have to and take revenge. You can count on it. And the poor victims probably won't know why it's happening even as they're being beaten and killed. But you know exactly why it would be happening, don't you!? Even after all the people you've killed and buried out there in the desert, you don't want the same thing to happen to the people I'm talking about, do you!?"

To tell the truth, he was only using the phone cable to charge the electric bug sprayer's lithium battery. It could not transmit data and the intelligence division was not that monstrous. But the more nervous a person was in general, the more easily they would go up in flames if you gave them a spark.

"A biometric scan error? The earphone measures the shape of your inner ear. You can fool that by stuffing something in there. That doesn't prove you're a body double."

"..."

"So here's the deal: if you're just a body double, you can ignore this, right? In that case, we're only talking about the brutal deaths of complete strangers. But that data is making its way to the military servers as we speak. I don't care which way this goes, so will you tell me what I need to know or will the electronic simulation division have to break the encryption to access it that way?"

Quenser only had one basis for making such a bold gamble.

Back in the maintenance base zone, Oh Ho Ho had said Grinov would not want to reveal any weakness to his subordinates and thus had never used a body double.

The muscular man with a large beard and short hair uttered a low groan.

"What do you want?"

"My friends' lives. Just getting the data out isn't enough to protect them. I need your identity to use this computer, so tell me how to approve and reject deals! What do I need after unlocking the computer!?"

He heard a dull thud.

The flat-screen monitor was on the desk, but the tower computer itself was below. The bearded man's hands were tied behind the back, but he had kicked the computer as hard as he could.

For him, stopping the supposed leak of personal data was enough.

"Dammit!! Grinov!!"

This response to the private threat suggested this really was the real one. But Quenser had pushed him too hard. Silencing the arms dealer with another stun gun blast was meaningless since the display on the monitor had already died. He detected the unique stench of burning plastic. He pulled the tower computer from below the desk, but the plastic cover had split open.

(That isn't all. Was there a plastic pack of chemicals in the empty space of an expansion slot? This is an elevated area with lots of seismic activity. Wasn't he afraid of an earthquake triggering this on accident?)

If the man was this cautious, it was unlikely he had sent any evidence of his crimes to an external cloud. But a search through all the drawers and the underside of the desk did not turn up any kind of flash memory.

It was hard to imagine there were no backups at all, but could he really find it in a hurry? Flash memory could be smaller than a kernel of corn. There was not enough time to tear up all of the mansion's carpeting and search through all of the circular farms. The farms extended beyond the horizon and it was even possible the backup was buried in the distant desert like a landmine. There was no finding that when he did not even know what color or shape to be looking for.

But he did have Grinov.

That man was needed to approve all deals. It might be possible to prove it was really him using the ear-scanning earphone. The broken computer might not actually be necessary as long as he knew that method. But he could not stay here. Even if he stopped the deal for the time being, the Woodstock soldiers would surround the room and take back Grinov once they noticed something was wrong. Then their godfather only needed to place the earphone in his ear and redo the approval work.

"..."

Quenser slowly inhaled and exhaled.

The computer was broken and he could not use the big boss here. So what did he have to do? Heivia, Myonri, and even the Princess. How could he stop the meaningless battle that was sure to destroy

those familiar faces?

The answer was obvious.

If he did it here, the big boss would be taken back. But if he did the work beyond the criminal organization's reach, they could not retrieve him.

The maid looked up and spoke.

"I don't care if you're alive or dead when we get there, Grinov Quarterdeck, but I'm taking you back to our maintenance base zone."

Part 7

The surprisingly loud sound of the wheels wore on Quensette's nerves.

The wheels belonged to a cleaning cart he had borrowed from the linen room on the same floor.

He was rolling it down the air-conditioned hallway to the office from which he had come.

"Is everything fine, Rosa?"

The dog barked in response.

Grinov managed a weak laugh with his hands tied behind his back and the dog keeping an eye on him.

"What do you hope to accomplish by stuffing me in there? Do you really think you can even escape this mansion?"

"If that isn't going to work, I can always chop off your bearded head and stuff it in a barf bag. Is that what you would prefer?"

"...Are you enjoying this?"

"What?"

"I have what you do not. In fact, this fate has befallen me because I have it. This is how oppressive our world is. There is no freedom here, only despair. How does it feel to prove that with your own actions?"

“...”

“We have almost certainly killed more criminals than all of you have. Everyone kills to keep themselves safe. The only difference is the set of rules we follow, but no one can really say which set is the correct one. You must know just how selfish the laws and international treaties enacted by the four world powers are. The justice you believe in is simply that which is poured from the tap when you hold out your hands. We have constructed a different set of rules on the other side of the coin. That is the truth of the matter.”

After instilling some politeness in the bearded man using a kick to his defenseless gut, Quenser chucked him into the cleaning cart and then had Rosa join him in that cramped space. What would happen to the man if he did anything to displease those two? Without the use of his hands, he could not avoid Quenser’s kicks and now there was a legit military dog right in front of him. There was no escape this time and no clever suicide was available, so it was sure to be a fun little picnic.

“Tear out his windpipe if he says anything, Rosa. Bringing back his corpse is good enough.”

It was unclear if she could actually understand such a complex command, but it only had to keep Grinov quiet.

After placing a few sheets over the cleaning cart to cover up the openings, Quenser glanced over at the drawers he had pulled out from the desk. They contained everything from documents to a handgun, but he was interested in something else: a car key.

“A Dynamix EV Grade 500s? That’s a luxury self-driving electric car, right?”

Seeing the maker’s logo reminded him of the TV commercial. It was an odd choice for Grinov who disliked the cloud and big data, but Dora Blue-Hawaii, the naked woman from the arms dealer he had met back in Hawaii, had wielded special equipment based on a flying car. He had also seen a self-driving tractor rolled over in the farms and the sprinkler system supporting those farms was program controlled. Perhaps Grinov’s personal desktop was its own thing and the organization as a whole had an online environment. ...Of course, they would be paying a hacker to provide specialized maintenance and inspections of the system just like paying a personal lawyer or accountant.

Quenser could not drive a car or motorcycle, but he could not be picky. He would let the machine handle it.

A peaceful solution had ceased to be an option from the moment he stunned Grinov. The snowball was already rolling down the hill, so he had to leave this Southern European mansion before things got worse at an accelerating rate.

“Okay.”

He pushed the cleaning cart down the hall now that it was much heavier than before. He could not use the stairs with this, so he needed the service elevator used for carrying food.

This was supposedly the top floor, but for some reason, there was both an up and a down button. Had they simply used the same standard panels for all floors, or was there an attic area? Either way, Quenser was only interested in going down. He pressed that button and waited.

The elevator was not like those found in a department store or hotel. It was the simple type with a metal accordion door that pulled to the side to open. It was small enough that the cart would almost entirely fill it. The wires were exposed and you could likely reach them if you stuck your hand through the gaps in the door.

Was this so plain and old-fashioned compared to the rest because the mansion's owner would never use it?

For a while, Quenser only heard a clanking sound much like an old clothes dryer. The building was only 3 floors, but the elevator must have used a pretty cheap motor.

(Hurry, hurry.)

Standing still only fueled his impatience. He had to consciously suppress the urge to tap his feet.

How long did it really take? A minute? Three minutes?

Finally, the view through the accordion door showed a giant mass appearing in the emptiness of the elevator shaft. There was no sign of a safety device, so there was nothing you could do if your finger or clothing got caught. Quenser waited for the elevator to come to a complete stop before he reached for the door.

And...

"Wait, don't do that! You need to press the button before sliding the door. If the elevator starts moving, you'll be caught in it!!"

He gasped.

But he was pretty sure he managed to keep it from showing on his face.

A sexy maid who looked a lot like a young wife stepped around a corner of the hallway and responded to Newcomer Quensette's clothing rather than his face.

“Wait. Why are you wearing the outdoor uniform for indoor work?”

He just about clicked his tongue. When he put on this maid uniform back in the prefab hut, hadn't he assumed the thick, heavy-duty uniform was meant for farm work? There was more than one variety of maid uniform here.

He did not need a lame excuse right now.

He shoved the cleaning cart into the elevator.

“Ah!”

He left behind the young wife maid, who clearly took her job too seriously to be wasted on a criminal organization, and he rapidly tapped the down button inside the elevator. The sexy and panicked maid ran over, but just before she arrived, the elevator (which was probably older than her) started moving with that disconcerting clanking sound.

Three floors.

Just three floors.

His heart was pounding. If that pheromone-leaking maid ran down the stairs or calmly used a radio or internal phone to call down to the lower floors, he might find some swarthy soldiers waiting for him when the elevator arrived. He was reminded of Grinov's amused threat about executing people by tying them to a car, dumping lighter fluid over their head, setting them on fire, and dragging them around until the flames died down.

“It does not matter if you achieve your dream or not.”

“Shut up, Grinov.”

“If an undesirable individual achieves success, this is how they are rewarded. Those in power will steal success from anyone who shows up later. And which side of that equation would you fall on? I doubt your position is as safe as you think it is.”

“I said shut up!!”

(It doesn't matter if he's dead. Would it have been easier to chuck him out the window and just casually walk down the stairs? Dammit!)

The best ideas always came to you after the train had passed that station.

The elevator arrived at the first floor.

The garage could not be that far away. He was sure to find it after walking 20 or 30 meters down the hallway.

But he ran across a maintenance soldier the instant he pushed the cleaning cart out into the hallway.

A gold necklace glittered at the man's neck.

This could have been a chance for sweet Quensette to test her acting skills, but...

"Gyah!"

A low zapping sound rang out.

The instant he was in range, Quenser hit the guy with his electric bug sprayer stun gun. He had no way of knowing how far word had spread from the young wife maid on the third floor, so he had to abandon the possibility of a safe option.

He did not know the right way to do this.

Nothing he was doing may have resembled the recommendations in the manuals of the Legitimacy Kingdom military's intelligence division.

But he had to trust that he had done the right thing.

"Hh!!"

He had seen the general location of the garage when viewing the mansion from outside, so he gripped the cleaning cart's handle and pushed it forcefully ahead. He sped up to a run and slammed the cart into a maintenance soldier who turned around in the center of the hallway to see what was happening.

With a sound louder than a bicycle crash, the cart hit him in the back of the hip and he writhed and rolled on the floor. However, he had a friend who stuck his head out of a nearby door.

"Rosa!!"

At his shout, the sheets placed over the cart were swept off from within. A dog leapt out like a jack-in-the-box and attacked before the surprised soldier could grab the assault rifle from the sling belt.

Quenser did not have time to see how it turned out.

He simply pushed the Grinov-carrying cart further on.

Then he heard a short scream.

He looked back with skirt fluttering and gave a quick shout.

“Rosa, leave her alone! Come here!!”

The dog ran right past a crouching girl in overalls.

“Dad...? No, how could this happen!?”

“Kh.”

This is what it meant to fight the arms dealers. The only people here were their friends and family. Nothing he did here would be appreciated in the slightest.

He still had a ways to go before reaching the garage.

The German shepherd caught up and easily passed him.

He did not bother opening the door.

Instead, he used the cart’s weight to smash through the door like a battering ram and continued right on in.

The place smelled of motor oil.

The air conditioning must have been off since no one was here, so it was sweltering inside.

It was quite large for a garage. Brightly polished luxury cars were lined up like at a dealership. They looked more like they were being displayed than stored.

Quenser walked quickly across the garage while making sure he did not accidentally kick any of the imitation platinum lying around. Enough to fill a 1-liter bottle would weigh 21.4kg, so he could easily break a toe on those things. He checked the inscription on the car key he had found.

“Rosa, search with me! N-A-5-7-8-7-6-4-4-3!!”

She cheerfully barked in response.

He patted Rosa’s head when she found the car he wanted. The Dynamix EV Grade 500s was a silver 4-door, but despite looking like a sports car, it had proper 4-wheel drive. It even had a winch. It was made powerful enough to drive around in the desert here. It was also quite spacious, making it perfect for car sex.

Quenser pressed the button on the key to unlock the door.

He pulled the bearded man out from the cleaning cart.

“Do you want the passenger seat or the trunk!?”

“I would prefer to see my fate coming so I can respond accordingly. You remind me a lot of me. I can tell you wish to turn this confused world on its head even if it means breaking the rules. What you see happening to me here is a path you too will walk one day.”

Without waiting for the man’s response, Quenser grabbed his head and shoved him into the car with his hands still tied behind his back. He had Rosa sit in the back seat where she could leap at Grinov at a moment’s notice. Quenser took the driver’s seat even though he did not know how to drive.

All he could do inside the hot car was switch on the air-conditioning.

(What do I do? I’ve never used a self-driving car before! I don’t even know how to start it up!!)

For some reason, the keyhole was on the side of the GPS screen. You inserted it like USB memory. The GPS seemed to be linked with control of the car, but it of course did not have the location of the coalition force’s maintenance base zone in its map data. He ultimately had to manually input the numerical coordinates and then the 500s started up with a quiet vroom. ...Although it was an electric car, so that was only a sound effect meant to sound the part.

However...

“Oh, oh? What?”

The garage’s exit was covered by a metal shutter, but the EV continued forward regardless. Based on the ads on TV, it could even parallel park on its own and it had the image recognition and collision prevention radar needed to stop just before actually hitting something. But those ads were just CG, weren’t they? Hadn’t there been a bunch of fine print at the edge of the screen saying that scenario was only for advertisement purposes? How real had it actually been??? Quenser’s shoulders

tensed up, but then he saw something: Grinov Quarterdeck in the passenger seat.

The man's hands were tied behind his back, but he kicked through the bottom of the dashboard, pulled out the bundled-together power cables, and tore them apart.

"Only miniskirt martial artist women should be that skilled with their legs!!!!!"

Quenser stopped the man with the electric bug sprayer stun gun, but it was too late. That wiring must have been part of the auto-brake system because the luxury EV ignored the obstacle up ahead, broke right through the metal shutter, and drove out into the garden.

A maintenance soldier stood in their way.

"Waah!?"

Quenser frantically grabbed the wheel and jerked it to the side. The self-driving car was program controlled, but it still gave priority to a manual override. They just barely avoided hitting the soldier, but there was no time to step on the brake pedal.

Stopping now would mean death.

He heard a short burst of gunfire from behind and the rear window shattered. The sweltering 40-degree air poured in. This was what he got for not killing that soldier. They must have wanted some level of bulletproofing but not wanted to be trapped in the car either because the glass was designed to break into beads with rounded edges. Rosa barked in annoyance as they landed on her.

The program was still running just fine.

However, the 500s could not use its brakes no matter what stood in its way: a flower bed, a metal fence, or a human. It was like a chaotic thrill ride.

"There is no saving you."

Either he had yet to recover from the stun gun or he had lost more blood from his neck wound than expected because the bearded man slurred his speech a bit in the passenger seat.

"No matter what happens in the meantime, you will reach a dead end. You will ultimately be surrounded and forced to beg for your life."

"Don't you have anything better to do?"

Why was the man provoking him like this while within arm's reach? Quenser used another stun gun blast to silence that king of the hill. People could get used to anything, so it looked like the electrical violence was not going to work much longer. He missed when he was looking after Hina Liqueurball back in the Hawaii District. Why were there no cute girls around here? He wanted to sulk.

They noisily broke through the main gate and went airborne for a moment as they left the mansion's property.

There was no such thing as safety around here.

But things were about to become even more dangerous. Once they reached the circular farms, they would have reached a giants' colosseum where multiple Objects fought.

(Oh, whoops. My uniform and explosives are still in that prefab hut. The little things don't matter as much, but I need to retrieve the communications equipment to save us some encryption trouble. This is an arms dealer's hideout, so they'll definitely sell them to the highest bidder!!)

After swerving around as best he could to avoid a rolled tractor and the remains of a grain silo, the hut came into view. He slammed on the brakes, pitched forward a bit, awkwardly pulled on the hand brake, and only then noticed the shift lever. He had the order backwards, but he tried grabbing that. It was an automatic, but he pushed too hard, shifting from drive all the way to reverse, and had to pull it back into park. He made a quick comment while opening the door.

"Rosa, kill him if he tries anything funny."

He received a reassuring bark in response.

Once outside, the scorching 40-degree sunlight hit him.

He was interested in the vent on the side of the concrete base, not the inside of the prefab hut itself. He crouched down, reached inside, and pulled out the gear he had stuffed inside a garbage bag.

He had only been gone for two minutes, but he returned to find the bearded man covered in blood. And not because his neck wound had reopened.

Quenser reacted with his expression flat.

"That's what happens when you try to run away, moron."

He had expected for Rosa to look proud of herself, but she was actually cowering down in the back seat. The problem seemed to be the garbage bag Quenser was carrying. She must not have wanted to put her bulletproof jacket back on. The maid(?) made sure to brush the round shards of glass out

of the dog's fur, and then...

"C'mon, Rosa. Don't struggle. A girl needs to look nice!"

Rosa barked in protest, but this was a battlefield. The jacket could be the difference between life and death, so he had to harden his heart.

Quenser got the bulletproof jacket on her.

"There, you go, Rosa. You look cute."

She only whined in an incredibly displeased way.

Quenser returned the shift lever and hand brake to normal and let the program take control once more.

At that very moment, the prefab hut was vaporized by a deafening explosion.

He was nearly knocked over even inside the car. No, it was the 500s itself that rose up on two wheels like someone lifting one side of a tea table.

A stray shell had hit.

By the time he realized that, the windows and mirrors had shattered and transparent flakes had poured down on his head. They were designed to shatter in round bead shapes, but he might have been soaked with blood otherwise. With those reflective additions to the maid uniform, Quensette had finally begun to sparkle.

The cool air-conditioned air was escaping the car.

A normal car might have stopped running at this point, but this was a self-driving car with its safety features gone. It forcibly returned to its designated course with an unnatural grinding sound.

The sound of corn and sprinklers being knocked down was rapidly approaching from the side.

Could anyone still call this Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper without a care in the world? The joint operation was a complete mess.

"They're already this close!?"

This was not the time to shout about the Object moving right in front of them. Something fell onto the hood with a sticky splat. This was not something they had hit; it had clearly fallen from above.

It was the upper half of a soldier.

“Hee! Eee!?”

Quenser’s eyes met those fully widened ones. There was nothing he could do. When the program-controlled electric car made a smooth turn, the corpse slid to the side and off the edge of the hood.

Only after it vanished from view did he realize it had worn a Legitimacy Kingdom uniform. But after seeing that, he did not have the courage to retrieve the dog tags.

Even now, the giants were chaotically duking it out above the heads of the mere worms. It did not matter whether or not they intended to attack. They could easily hit their own allies without meaning to. And regardless, it was obvious who would break if it was human against machine.

“Whose Object is that!? Which side are they on!?”

He tried to look up and check, but they were too close to see past the bottom. It was hard to look straight up while inside a car. He remained uncertain of anything as the windowless car ended up passing between the two fighting Objects.

And that was not the only battle.

It was happening everywhere.

The neatly-maintained circular corn fields were blown away, self-driving tractors burned on their sides, and all the grain silos had collapsed. Fresh water was precious in the desert, but it gushed from the broken sprinklers. Some horses must have escaped from somewhere because they were running around in a panic. This was hell on earth. And it was gradually approaching that mansion filled with noncombatants, even if they were the friends and family of the arms dealers. The end result was not a pleasant thing to imagine.

“Oh, right. My radio.”

Since it was a self-driving car, Quenser was free to take his eyes off the road(?). Before he even twisted around and reached into the back seat, Rosa had already dug through the garbage bag and grabbed the device in her mouth. He gave her a quick pat as he switched it on to hear different voices describing the state of the battlefield. It was a little like the audio tour at a museum.

“Ho ho. Oh ho ho ho ho! To be honest, my Gatling 033 is perfect already and has no need for a

scattershot weapon, but you would make for a nice, if pitiful, backup dancer. Now watch in awe and think about how you could help accentuate what I can do. Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho!!”

“Nice, that one earns you a lot of points. The Capitalist Corporations is edging out the Faith Organization now! Is that the final offer? Anyone else want to show off what they can do for us!?”

“Ehhh? Sticking with it longer will increase the price of fuel??? Then what’s the point of any of this!?”

“This is a gift from god! It is no mere coincidence that a cutting-edge Second Generation is within our grasp here!! Just take apart the words ‘Parasite Plan’ and rearrange them. We must not waste this opportunity!!”

“It’s almost laughable how much they’re all letting this arms dealer mess with them...”

It was complete chaos.

They had set up a temporary joint channel for Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper, so everyone’s reports were jumbled together.

Quenser clicked his tongue in the driver’s seat and looked off into the distance.

There he saw a familiar Object: the Baby Magnum.

It had been half-dead when he left, but it was still under attack from multiple other Objects. The Legitimacy Kingdom’s Escalibor must have had trouble joining the battle, so it had yet to show itself.

Was the Legitimacy Kingdom the only one opposing the fight to take the arms dealer Object for themselves? She had to treat every other participant in this giants’ fight as an enemy. Even more than the illegal Second Generation Gangster had to.

The others were ganging up on the weakest one so they would not end up in last place themselves. They had been tricked into thinking that was the right thing to do. This was the cold principle of “survival of the fittest” applied to the economic and financial fields. This was how Grinov Quarterdeck manipulated people using profit and loss.

Simply listening was not enough.

The Princess would never last at this rate. As long as the Gangster remained at the center of it all, the coalition force would continue to be manipulated and they would continue ganging up on the Princess who was insisting on what was right.

It did not matter if they would not listen to a reasonable argument. Quenser decided to do this according to the dirty logic of the arms dealers and their Parasite Plan.

He needed to move the eye of the storm.

He hit his radio's switch in order to save the Princess.

He had just one goal:

"What the hell, Oh Ho Ho!? Are you still stuck on something so shallow!?"

"Wha- huh!?"

"You're free to invest in whatever you want, but if you don't get Woodstock's Object, everything you've spent on it goes right down the drain. Do you have any idea how much a single shot from an Object costs!? Surely you know wars between powerful nations are a lot like throwing attaché cases stuffed with cash at each other! This is your choice, so it's your responsibility. You do understand that the more you pay, the riskier a gamble it is, right? Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to the future idol of newspaper clothing, lady of a cardboard home, and saint of styrofoam!!"

"Quenser...?"

Weapons, ammo, fuel, and personnel. War was expensive.

They might be hoping to confiscate money and valuables from the criminal organization.

They might be after the resources in the nearby salt lake.

They might be filming material for a music video.

They might be using the result to demand funding from an international anti-crime foundation.

...After all, this was not the usual clean wars fought against other nations. You did not earn money simply by defeating dirty criminals. And no one wanted to go into debt. The world powers had only joined this fight after counting their chickens before they hatched and assuming they could make some money from it.

But what if it did not work out?

Without the income they assumed they would receive, all the money they spent would not be coming back. It was the same as investing in wheat futures or flipping real estate. If their estimates proved

naïve, the amount they invested went down the drain and the VIPs in a supposed position of safety would lose their jobs.

“By the way, Oh Ho Ho, what happened to the Information Alliance’s Perfect Range? If it was blown away into scraps, you’re going to have a real hard time making up for that loss.”

Who would be forced to take responsibility there?

A deadly game of musical chairs was fast approaching.

“Ho, oh ho ho. Don’t be silly! War is a serious matter that cannot be discussed in terms of simple morality and heroism. Be a sore loser if you like, but your bluffs cannot rattle me...”

“Say cheese!”

Quenser ignored her and instead held up his mobile device. He made sure he and the restrained arms dealer boss were in the frame, snapped a photo, and uploaded it using the coalition force datalink.

“Grinov Quarterdeck has been captured. Can you really continue your deal with Woodstock if I slit his throat? Every deal they make requires his approval. These are criminals we’re talking about, so you can’t expect them to follow a verbal promise made on the battlefield. And with their boss out of his mansion, who’s going to sign the contract!?”

Part 8

A tremor raced across the battlefield.

Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper had entered a new phase.

A tiny dot on the map held Grinov Quarterdeck’s life in his hands. If he threatened the big boss with a knife or gun, Woodstock might ignore the world powers’ courtship dances and sell their Object to him instead.

This was not a metropolis with EM signals flying around 24/7. They needed to locate the source of the radio transmission and decide whether to protect it or attack it.

It was a tangle of various information and intentions.

For example...

“Who...?”

Frolaytia Capistrano was trembling in the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone.

The coalition force had their bases set up adjacent to each other and a direct attack in violation of the war treaties could come at any time. The base commander was forced to keep a carbine on hand, but the busty silver-haired officer ignored that abnormal situation as she raised her voice.

“Who in the world is that maid!? Why does she have our equipment!? That’s Quenser’s ID number, so...did she find his radio somewhere? Investigate this immediately!!”

While crawling through the desert of fattened flies, Private Heivia Winchell stared in disbelief at the screen of his mobile device along with Myonri who had entered nightmare mode after her eyes met those of what was buried below the sand.

“The legendary maid? What is she doing here!?”

In the Information Alliance maintenance base zone, silver-haired and brown-skinned Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito said something she could never say in earshot of the girl she was producing as a world-famous idol.

“This maid...has what it takes!!”

And.

All four world powers roared at once.

“The holy girl seen at the Eastern European monastery hotel has reappeared here!? The goddess of victory is smiling upon us! This battle is ours!!”

Part 9

(Oh, crap. I forget I was still Quensette.)

Quenser only realized that after he had uploaded the photo, but this was no time to worry over it like a social media mistake.

Definite killer intent turned his way from all across the battlefield. Those 5 billion dollar giants focused on the bug crawling around at their feet. And they took action to exterminate it.

“Did you really think you could change things?” The muscular bearded man scoffed from the passenger seat with his hands still tied behind his back. “There is no changing the outcome now. This is what happens when you try to create a world not bound by the four world powers! You squandered what little chance you had. How could someone like you stop so many rampaging Objects!?”

Quenser punched Grinov from the driver’s seat in the 40-degree air entering through the broken windows, but it did not silence the man.

“What did you see in the Hawaii District? What about in that Eastern European tourist region struggling for independence from the old system?”

“...”

“There is no such thing as pure evil. We simply wished to walk a different path from those corpulent monstrosities seated above us and devouring so much money. That was all! We couldn’t trust the laws or international treaties decided by those world powers, so we tried constructing a different set of rules. We tried clinging to the other side of the coin!! We have killed more criminals than all the police in the world. Were we good or evil? A ridiculous question. If you insist on categorizing everything that way as an excuse to take all the lives you want, then we were the ones standing on the side of justice!”

“So what? Did you think you could do anything just cause you were clever enough to break free of the yoke? How many people do you think died for your selfish ends!? We act like Hina’s case was resolved, but was it really? It’s not like she gets her parents back after they were fed to sharks in a cruel execution!!”

“Woodstock had its beginnings making guns from the wood of a bloodstained forest and selling them to spread chaos throughout the world.”

The man gave an odd smile.

It looked like an overinflated balloon that would pop as soon as someone touched it.

“It was a joint military exercise, so they claim no one knows which side shot that shell. More than 30,000 innocent people died, but no one was punished. So many were slaughtered and not a single person was arrested or thrown in prison. And everyone forgot all about it not two months later. By then the headlines were all about how cute some panda in the zoo is!!”

“You...”

“My dream was to discover the truth and reveal it to the world. I needed enough power to prevent the countries and their governments from suppressing it. But the more power I gained, the more

they interfered and worked to hide the truth!! No matter how big the organization grew. What is your dream? Whatever it is, you will one day walk this same path whether you have power or not. Because that is how our world works!!”

They had seen something while pursuing the Ivory Garden poachers in Eastern Europe.

A black forest unnaturally burned to the ground.

“...”

The electric car played a simple “vroom” sound effect as it bounced over a bump in the ground.

“Who is it you resent?” asked Quenser. “Because you’re as much a killer as them now.”

“The same fate awaits you.”

They left the torn-up circular farms and reached the rolling sand dunes of the desert. That land of scorching sand contained mystery huts and unnatural swarms of flies that carried an atmosphere of death. The car used a program to drive, but it seemed to be sliding to the side more than before. Quenser’s stomach was squeezed by a unique fear different from slipping on ice.

What did Grinov himself think?

In his attempt to outdo everyone else and make a case for what was right, he had created tons of secrets he could not reveal even to his family and he had been forced to bury them all in the desert.

Was he plagued with nightmares, or did he not bat an eye at it anymore?

“Welcome to the beyond.”

It was like the words of death itself.

The muscular bearded man with distinctive tattoos all over his body spoke with an odd nervousness in his voice.

“These are the farthest reaches of the earth, outside the world powers. All is permissible here, no matter how unreasonable. A world where 1 plus 1 does not equal 2 is a very cruel thing. Now tremble as you see white become black before your eyes.”

Quenser considered using the stun gun again, but things changed before he could.

The earth rose up before them. The Dynamix EV Grade 500s flipped sideways like it was caught on the tea table as a giant overturned it.

“Gaaah!?”

With the windows already broken, the sand rushed in and his head was nearly taken off, but he did not have time to writhe around while upside down. An Object had targeted them. He grabbed Grinov’s shoulder, called out to Rosa in the back seat, and crawled out through what had once been the windshield.

The direct sunlight stabbed into him in that 40-degree hell. He would have to travel by foot in the scorching desert.

(5km to go. But I can’t reach the maintenance base zone!!)

A shadow enveloped them.

The first to arrive was...

“The Rush!!”

“Oh, dear? Oh ho ho. You have the makings of an excellent idol, but who are you? Are you the legendary maid the internet is making such a fuss about? ...No, wait. This can’t be. This voiceprint belongs to...no, no. This must be an error.”

Not even an Object’s high-quality cameras had revealed Quensette’s identity. Quenser was a little impressed with himself for that, but for now he reached an arm around Grinov’s back to squeeze at his injured neck and stuck a pen-shaped electric fuse in the man’s nose.

“I hold Grinov Quarterdeck’s life in my hands! This fuse is enough to blow out the son of a bitch’s brains. An Object is powerful, but you can’t shoot just me like a police sniper, can you!?”

“Oh ho ho. What a filthy mouth you have, Miss Legendary Maid. But you must not underestimate Objects. I would hate to eliminate such a promising future idol, but if you do not watch your mouth, social media will not be so kind to you.”

He glimpsed some Information Alliance uniforms from beyond the dunes. They were coming his way. If those more precise soldiers surrounded him during his standoff with the Rush, it was checkmate. It was idealistic, but Quenser was convinced he had a way out.

Why had the Dynamix EV Grade 500s driven along the ridge of those dunes as if avoiding something?

“Call your soldiers off.”

“Oh ho ho. Why should I?”

“They’ll have nightmares if you don’t.”

There was a short shriek.

The secretly buried landmines would not be recorded on the GPS system’s map, so if something had caught those soldiers, it had to be a natural trap. For example, some quicksand that acted like a bottomless bog.

He had thought it was suspicious due to the flies swarming around.

The Information Alliance soldiers might be all about rationalism, but he doubted they could just laugh and accept the company of some dismembered and rotting corpses.

“Rosa.”

The dog dragged the winch wire out from the overturned four-wheel-drive car and threw it to the Information Alliance soldiers seeking help. But Quenser could do nothing more for them since his life was at risk here.

“Looks like you can’t rely on those soldiers. If you think you can save Grinov with those giant cannons, then try it.”

“Ho, oh ho ho.”

“Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper? All deals require Grinov’s approval, so any business with Woodstock goes out the window if you turn him to ashes. And a single shot from your main cannon is like several attaché cases. How much have you spent already? Do you want to live a life of never-ending debt, idol of newspaper clothing!?”

“Tch!!”

He heard a clear tongue click over the radio.

The Rush turned 180 degrees around and spoke to the Faith Organization Second Generation that soon showed up.

“Oh ho ho. The Information Alliance will settle this! The rest of you slowpokes can stand back!!”

"It is up to the lord to decide what happens, not us lowly humans. Now, let us pray to god! Succeed or fail, it is all part of his plan!!"

"You damn endorphin junky!!"

The aircushions gave a roar as the two Objects began a meaningless clash.

Quenser gulped.

The center of the conflict had shifted from the Gangster to him. The Objects were fighting over him now. It was like he had uttered some magic words to change the flow of battle and bring death to different people. The maid student slowly walked backwards while using Grinov as a shield.

He was 5km away.

If he crossed the desert, he would find the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone waiting for him. If he brought Grinov there, the others would no longer be manipulated by the possible business deal. Whether it came down to a plea bargain or hellish torture, they could get the man to "officially" annul the Gangster's verbal promise.

"Princess, the overall formation has changed. Find a gap in the chaos and escape! I'll take care of myself, so you don't need to force yourself to support me!!"

"Quenser, where are you? If I don't have a clear signal, I might hit you with a stray shot!!"

"...It is no use," said the bearded man.

"Shut up, Grinov. You aren't some revolutionary commander or strategist. You're nothing more than a stamp of approval for us!"

"Do you think you will keep your life if you always make the reasonable, safe, and secure option? This is the beyond, where 1 plus 1 does not equal 2. The more you outdo the others and break free of the rules, the clearer the outlines of the grim reaper grow."

"If you don't want one of these fuses up your ass, then shut your trap!!"

Quenser did not so much hear the deep rumbling as he felt it shaking the entire desert below his feet.

This was coming from much further away than the nearby battle between the Information Alliance and Faith Organization.

Woodstock had lost its original form as the truth it wished to reveal was suppressed. They had eventually built the Second Generation Gangster.

It was supposedly a close-range Object.

Remote targeting drones flew around it like flies, perhaps to cover its blind spots. The arms dealer Object was reminiscent of the stench of death despite being a machine. Its main cannon was a double shotgun made from the coilgun and rapid-fire beam cannon on the right side. It was designed so it could not aim very precisely.

But the next thing Quenser knew, muscular bearded Grinov was moving his mouth while bound and used as a shield. He was not actually producing any sound, but he could still communicate with someone who could read his lips via a long-range camera.

“What did you tell them?” Quenser roared into the man’s ear while shoving the pen-shaped electric fuse hard enough to give him a nosebleed. “What did you tell that monster, Grinov!?”

“A 20-digit random alphanumeric string. A temporary emergency authorization code in case I cannot use biometric identification.”

“It can’t be.”

“Woodstock is a criminal organization supported by its charismatic leader, Grinov Quarterdeck.”

His entire body had gone limp.

After giving up on everything, he may have been enveloped in a sort of ecstasy.

Yes.

Hadn’t he immediately tried to slit his own throat when Quenser initially knocked him out with the stun gun!?

“I told them not to leave any trace of my body. As long as no definite proof remains, people can claim I am still alive.”

He said nothing more.

Quenser shoved muscular Grinov away and got down on the desert sand such that he lay protectively on top of Rosa.

And a moment later, it all swept toward him like electron beams reflecting through a storm of heavy metal.

There was no attempt at all to rescue the hostage.

Part 10

His entire body groaned with dull pain. It was like all the cartilage in his body had been replaced with instant glue. It was hard to move and forcing it felt like it would cause something to snap.

He was soaked with cold sweat.

He could almost forget this was the 40-degree desert.

"...Rosa..." groaned Quenser while trying to catch his breath.

The Rush had tried to jump into the line of fire, but how effective had that really been?

"Are you okay, Rosa?"

Even the weak whine he got in response may have been a blessing.

There was an unnatural dent in the dog's bulletproof jacket. Had a shard of stone hit it?

Spots of the desert were melted orange. When they cooled and hardened, they would likely become muddy glass. The shape of the rolling dunes had been torn away.

"Dammit, did they really kill their own boss?"

Grinov Quarterdeck had "disappeared". And he had passed on the temporary 20-digit code needed to approve a deal without their godfather's biometric ID. Now on one could overturn the Gangster's verbal promise.

Was it now impossible to stop the dirty business deal of the Parasite Plan? Was there no preventing the Objects of the four world powers from continuing to tear each other apart with this needless fighting?

That man had acquired a vast fortune by selling weapons all so he could rise above the existing hierarchy of power and have his way.

It was possible to view him as a predecessor to Quenser on his journey to be an Object designer.

But that man was now dead.

And his death had closed off the future.

(No.)

“Not yet, Rosa! Bring me that head over there!!”

With a woof, Rosa ran over while avoiding the boiling sand puddles. It was a horrific game of fetch, but it contained a glimmer of hope.

It really had been a scattershot weapon.

Its aim was poor at mid-range. Grinov Quarterdeck had been killed instantly and mostly vaporized, but a few body parts remained. The Gangster’s Elite might claim the man was still alive if it was only a hand or a foot, but the head was a different matter. The brain and heart were too decisive. If Quenser brought that back to the maintenance base zone, he could prove Grinov was dead. Without their charismatic leader, the arms dealer would fall apart and they could not guarantee their verbal promise. The Object’s Pilot Elite had been given the temporary authorization code, but it was only temporary. It was not enough to overturn Grinov’s actual biometrics.

(It had secondary cannons on its spherical body and float, but that Second Generation is illegal and it wasn’t built under normal circumstances. It might not have been given proper anti-personnel weapons.)

Yes.

Grinov had used a scan of his inner ear to identify himself.

As long as his head remained, they could stick the earphone in his ear and pass the biometric scan.

The godfather’s official code would have greater authority than the temporary authorization code.

And who would trust the Elite who had directly killed Grinov Quarterdeck?

They may have been a faithful subordinate who only did as told, but the dead boss could no longer vouch for the Pilot Elite.

The Elite was on the precipice.

“Wait, Grinov’s...head!?” exclaimed Oh Ho Ho. “What am I supposed to do now!?”

“Do you really think the deal is still on? From here on, Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper is all about staying out of last place. Will you continue spending money throwing attaché cases at each other, or will you pull back your hand while the burn is still light!? Think for yourself, idol of newspaper clothing!!”

It would have been too grotesque just to carry it around, so Quenser pulled the windshield sun shade from the flipped-over electric car and wrapped the bearded head in that.

“This is an economic shock. All four world powers are carrying some debt thanks to that idiot’s manipulation. At the very least, you aren’t making money here! So whoever ends up with the least debt is the winner!! It’s the logic of the insurance industry: think of other people’s misfortune as your profit. You want to take a relative view and get the last laugh, don’t you!? You win this battle if you aren’t the world power in last place!!”

“Argh, I can’t stand feeling like an amateur maid is bossing around an idol like me!!”

“Hear me out, little lady. I’ll treat you right.”

He could not flip the car back over, so he was facing the nightmarish visual of a maid making a deadly trek across the desert with only a severed head and a German shepherd for company.

There were of course those who pursued him: the Gangster who did not want Grinov’s death to be proven, and the Faith Organization that was still after their tech.

Incidentally, the previous conversation was held over the coalition force’s shared datalink.

That meant it had gone out to all four world powers who had initially been allies. All four armies had learned which side would benefit them the most and how the battle’s win conditions had changed.

It probably took them a few seconds to think about it.

And then everything changed.

The masses of metal belonging to the Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, and Capitalist Corporations turned to face the Gangster.

At this point, it was bizarre that the Faith Organization was still siding with the arms dealers, but they were working off of the mysterious idea that both success and failure were a gift from god. So once they had a plan, they intended to stick with it to the end.

It was now 3-against-2.

The Princess's Object was barely functional, so it may have been more like 2-against-2.

In the initial thunderclouds, the Gangster had come out on top despite being outnumbered. This was not enough to say anything for sure, but the situation was much better than when everyone had been ganging up on the Princess.

This was the beyond.

Grinov had called it an unreasonable world where 1 plus 1 did not equal 2 and white could become black. Quenser was protected by the world powers, so he could not even imagine what kind of reality the man had faced in that bloodstained forest. But the world was gradually catching on to the all too obvious result of letting a criminal organization influence them.

He had to keep this going.

He had to return everything to the original rails

"Pant, pant!"

It was only 5km. No more than that. Traveling across a scorching desert of fine beach-like sand and rolling dunes was completely different from walking across asphalt. It was a lot easier than dragging around an entire hostage, but if not for the situation, he would have tossed aside the head which was far more disturbing than a roast turkey. Rosa the German shepherd easily passed him by and repeatedly looked back and waited for him to catch up.

Quenser did not care what happened to the other Objects as long as the Princess was safe.

He could determine the flow of battle as long as he brought the big boss's head back to the maintenance base zone as material evidence of Grinov's death.

(Almost there...)

His exhaustion was at the limit.

His thighs and calves would have started convulsing if he let his guard down.

(Almost there!!)

A deafening roar blasted his naïve assumptions to smithereens.

The attack had come from the side. By the time he flinched back, an orange river cut across the

desert before his eyes. It was the reflecting attack made from a mixture of a metal coilgun and a rapid-fire electron beam cannon. This cut off the direct route. There was more than one kind of glass, but pure silicon glass required something in the neighborhood of 2000 degrees. He was almost to the maintenance base zone, but this had stopped him.

The Object must have shot down some of its own drones because the destructive power was so great

The Gangster's "winged eyes and ears" covered with arrow-like patterns had crashed into the scorching desert in a few places. Quenser's sense of scale had been thrown off when they were flying in the sky, but now he could tell they were larger than a light car.

"Kh!!"

He heard a low rumbling coming from the side. The Gangster had approached surprisingly close.

It aimed its scattershot main cannon at a mere human. It wanted to erase any and all proof of Grinov's death.

"Rosa!!"

Quenser practically rolled along the desert to slide down one of the large dunes. There was a deafening blast and blinding light, but the massive mountain of sand would be melted instead of blown away. It would function as a shield.

But he doubted it would last forever.

He looked down at the wreckage of a drone that was half broken and stabbed into the sand.

The large cross section was larger than a small bed and broken shards of silver metal were strewn across the hot sand.

(That's not steel. Is it aluminum? Or silver? No...)

"Ugh, what!?"

He traced his fingers across the brick-sized chunk and then tried to pick it up, but it was so unusually heavy he nearly hurt his back. It was too heavy to lift with one hand.

The density was much greater.

Lead wasn't enough and not even silver would provide this kind of weight.

Quenser could only think of one option.

(Platinum...? Why would they use that?)

“No, wait. Is this the imitation alloy I saw in Grinov’s mansion?”

But even so, it was made to imitate platinum, giving it a density of 21.4. Enough to fill a 1-liter carton of milk would weigh 21.4kg. He could see why trying to lift it with one hand had nearly hurt his back.

But that only raised further questions.

Why?

In every branch of the military, vehicles were generally designed to be light and sturdy. Whether the power came from an engine, a motor, or a sail to catch the wind, it was a set amount of power. That meant the key to harnessing that power was reducing the vehicle’s weight.

Objects were the 200,000-ton behemoths they were because they had been crammed full of everything needed to end the nuclear age. That was their completed form with nothing going to waste.

Why would someone intentionally make something heavier by filling it with weights? This was different from a rich person covering a vehicle with gold metalwork to show off. When Quenser looked inside the cross section again, most of the car-sized drone looked like a weight made from the imitation alloy.

(Were they designed to make ramming attacks if necessary? Do they use the absorption of hydrogen? No, then they would use a cheaper and more effective material like lead or titanium. Also the imitation alloy is just an imitation. It only resembles platinum, so it doesn’t have all the same traits. But it does have the 21.4 density. Was Woodstock attracted to its weight, like with tungsten or depleted uranium?)

Rosa barked next to him.

It was hard to find anywhere to hide in the desert, so he could not just stand out here in the open. He knew that, but he could not stop thinking either.

This was something he could not afford to slip past him.

It was crucial.

(Think...)

The Gangster could circle around and fire on him from a different angle and, even if it missed, it would only create more deadly orange rivers. If he was surrounded by that melted glass, he would be stuck here.

Fortunately, the business deal had almost entirely collapsed. The other Objects would fight the Gangster as long as that was in their best interest. Quenser did not need to charge toward it with a bomb in hand. What was its weakness? Where was the weak point that could take it out in a single hit!?

(It's a blind killer that can see through all forms of camouflage, deception, and cover. But if it was really that convenient, they would have built the entire Object around that. Think back to the attack from the thundercloud. How did it overturn being outnumbered? The scattershot weapon? Why is that most effective!? The two different systems have to add to the maintenance costs, so why bother with the dual main cannon system!? It shouldn't have been able to see through the cloud and the lightning would have affected radar. What's the purpose of the drones swarming it like flies and why are they filled with that imitation alloy!?)

He heard a loud sliding sound as a bunch of sand pushed toward him like something from a surfing video.

"Quenser! I don't know where you are, but check your map. I'll create a path for you!!"

It was the Baby Magnum. The Princess was intentionally scraping the ground with her static electricity propulsion device to cover the orange river with a mountain of sand. Sand was the most primitive firefighting method, but it was also the most effective if you had enough of it. The scale was quite different, but the principle was the same as a campfire. If a thick layer of sand covered it faster than the heat could propagate, you could walk over the top.

(She's such a good girl, but she's way too reckless!!)

The Gangster's dual scattershot weapons would be aimed at the intruder. The coilgun and rapid-fire beam cannon were powerful enough at midrange, so what would they do at close range? A clean hit could blow away the already-damaged Princess's reactor.

This called for a gamble.

Quenser hit his radio's switch.

"Fire either a railgun or coilgun into the sand below you!!"

This attack was like a smokescreen.

Sand burst up in front of the Baby Magnum like a cumulonimbus cloud and the hit to the ground knocked Quenser from his feet.

But that did not matter.

The thick cloud of sand was immediately torn apart as the frightening scattershot attack flew toward the Princess.

Part 11

There was no dodging it.

Lots of sparks flew from the already-damaged Baby Magnum's armor.

It was a direct hit.

And from close range, where the scattershot weapons could deliver their full power.

But.

But.

But.

"...?"

The Princess hesitantly spoke after receiving the scattershot storm.

"I'm...alive?"

The villain was apparently confused as well. The Gangster moved horizontally and fired its dual scattershot weapons from a different angle. By unleashing both metal coilgun shells and the electron heating beams, it should have produced a deadly storm that not even specialized armor could stop.

But.

Even so.

"Again, Princess."

A massive cloud of scorching sand rose from the 40-degree desert.

There was a loud scraping sound and orange sparks blossomed wildly from the surface of her Object, but that was all. That violent scattershot weapon did not make its way inside the Object. It was deflected by the armor.

“What just...happened?” asked Oh Ho Ho.

“It’s the rate of convergence,” whispered Quenser. “Scattershot weapons are so powerful at point-blank range because the target is hit by all of the scattering shots. At mid and long range, the target is only hit by a few of the small shots, so it doesn’t do enough damage to kill instantly. The damage is spread over a wider area. ...That must have felt like a waste, so they used the lead scattershot to reflect the electron beams to provide the optimal rate of convergence as the scattershot blast spreads out over a fan shape.”

The initial clash had happened in thick thunderclouds that rendered all forms of sensor unusable.

Yet the Gangster had unilaterally slaughtered its enemies.

How exactly had it done so?

And if its advantage had really been that unilateral, wouldn’t it have been racing freely across the battlefield?

No, that was not it.

The most effective attack with a scattershot weapon was to move in to close range, but the Gangster had made no real attempt to do so.

It had shown no real sign of moving around. It had fired its main cannon from one direction and then blown up the scattered coalition Objects one at a time. That was odd when its scattershot weapons could not use their full power unless it moved in close. It had instead responded from mid and long range.

Even while inside that thundercloud.

“So how did the Gangster accurately measure the distance from its target? Normal vision and laser beams were useless in the thick cloud, the electrification rendered radar waves useless, and the noisy thunder did the same for ultrasonic sonar! Come to think of it, those red wings in Hawaii were the same. And the Transylvanian Object never made its debut, but it may have used some kind of special sensor system too! That must be Woodstock’s trademark!!”

“What are you trying to say, Quenser?”

That was obvious.

Once you understood this, the fearsome Second Generation Gangster was a complete joke.

“The desert might look like pure sand, but it’s actually full of sharp rocks. GPS systems choose a single path through the vast desert to make sure you don’t blow a tire on those obstacles.”

“What...what does that matter?”

“If the density of the ground changes, so does the speed at which waves propagate through it. In fact, a ground of sand and a mineral deposit containing iron ore cause a slight difference in the earth’s gravity.”

In other words, this was the crucial sensor system.

This was the secret behind the blind killer that could see through any camouflage, deception, or cover.

“It uses gravity surveying! It searches for the slight differences in gravity created by the giant hunks of metal that are Objects!!”

His hint had been the drone the Gangster had shot down itself.

It had contained a valuable and unnatural metal that only served as a weight.

At more than 20 euros a gram, platinum was the king of precious metals. Although this was only an imitation alloy.

“Gravity surveying? Isn’t that used for mining?”

“Yes. The earth’s gravity isn’t uniform. For example, there’s a bit of a difference between the North Pole and the Equator and the reading would change if there was a vein of heavy iron ore in this sandy desert. So by placing a bunch of sensors out there in a grid, you can tell if there’s a difference in just one spot. Dig there and you find the vein.”

“Heavy iron. So it works for an Object too?”

“That’s a bit too imaginative.” Quenser grinned. “The Gangster probably has high-precision electronic scales inside it. Some of those can measure down to a 10 millionth of a gram and it’s the

exact same equipment gangs use to work with white powder.”

Of course, that would not be used to simply measure something’s weight.

Scales could be used for more than just that.

“It’s using those as accelerometers to measure its own speed. Usually, you only feel an inertial vector opposite to the direction of movement. Just like how you feel a floating sensation in an elevator. But the needle will wiggle if there’s a giant mass nearby. It’s small, but another vector is included and the value changes.”

“And?”

“The drones flying around the Gangster were loaded with a lot of imitation alloy. That alloy has a density of 21.4 and is normally used to fool the other party in an illegal transaction. Filling them with that sort of ‘decoration’ makes no sense when designs should be aiming for light and sturdy. That means the weight was necessary. And unlike tungsten or depleted uranium, this imitation alloy could be acquired cheaply and in large quantities. They wanted something heavy enough to cause a 10 millionth of a gram error in the electronic scale even at a distance.”

In other words...

“They’re an alternate form of remote sensor that uses gravity. There are invisible threads of gravity between the Gangster and the drones. If something – yes, like the tug of gravity from an enemy Object – slightly alters the movement of the drones, the Object can sense it through the invisible threads. It’s kind of like having your hair blowing in the wind. There aren’t actually nerves running through the hairs. It wasn’t light, EM, or sound. It was universal gravitation itself. With that information, no Object can hide from it!!”

That said.

The gravity surveying might be able to see through any form of camouflage or deception, but it was not without weaknesses.

“When you get down to it, it’s all dependent on a reaction in the invisible threads connecting the Object to the drones. It’s the same as a cheap wind gauge. If you prepare plenty of obstacles to tug on a bunch of the hairs at once, it will get a bunch of false readings! There’s nothing it can do when there are too many dots on the map to process. It blinds the Gangster like a stun grenade!!”

The thunderclouds and clouds of sand had obscured their vision back at the beginning, but those were natural phenomena. With accurate meteorological data, you could predict the flow of the clouds and sand and make corrections in advance. That Object had planted its roots here in the desert, so unlike the newcomers of the coalition force, it could respond to sudden downpours and

other weather phenomena that were hard to see coming with no more than a satellite weather map.

But this was different.

It was intentional obstruction.

There was no way to predict it in advance and apply a filter.

Once you understood that, there was nothing to be afraid of.

No matter how powerful it was, a weapon you could not aim was the same as a gun with a broken sight. A main cannon that could not defeat an enemy head-on and at close range was meaningless. And like anything on the battlefield with no means of attacking, that Object was now a sitting duck.

The Gangster had plenty of secondary cannons on its spherical body and float, but there was almost no chance of those breaking through an Object's thick armor.

"Attention all armies."

Quenser held the radio to his mouth.

And he gave the death sentence.

"The Parasite Plan? Are you really going to keep throwing around attaché cases full of your own cash to get your hands on a defective weapon cobbled together by amateurs?"

Wartime interests could be truly coldhearted.

Woodstock had to understand that deep down after trying to use exactly that fact even if it meant trampling on the line between good and evil.

It was like taking an insect with excellent camouflage and throwing it onto a hot pink floor.

Once revealed, its grotesque insect side was all anyone could see.

This time, the entire coalition force aimed at the criminal organization's Object.

Even the Faith Organization had snapped out of it.

The Gangster's scattershot weapon was of no use and it had no white flag signal since it did not belong to a proper military.

This was the beyond, the ends of the earth outside the clean wars.

It was Operation Southern Cross Grim Reaper.

Woodstock had made a risky gamble that traded safety for freedom.

And the pig had just been dropped in the piranha-infested river.

<http://tl.rulate.ru/book/5253/775210>