

Chapter 3: In Search of the New Year >> Mont Blanc Borderline Mopping Up Operation

Part 1

The year was truly at its end.

It was December 31 and they were at Mont Blanc, highest mountain in the Alps.

“Okay, we will be using this snowy mountain for some overnight combat training.”

“You really are trying to kill us, aren’t you!!!???”

The potatoes could not stop complaining in Chamonix, a blank zone at the foot of that famous mountain that had given its name to a kind of cake. However, if they wanted to survive this dangerous night in the mountains, they needed to be a little more observant than that. Major Frolaytia Capistrano had the eyes of a dead fish as she stood on the stage in front of them.

The temperature was currently 0 degrees.

But they must not take that too lightly just because they expected the base of the highest mountain in Alps to be a lot colder. Human beings were creatures who could get hypothermia and die if the temperature inside their ass dropped by just one degree.

In the line of potatoes, Heivia let out a white breath and spoke quietly while shivering.

“What good is having an Island Nation obsessed commander if she won’t let you spend New Year’s curled up below a kotatsu eating soba or something?”

“You hadn’t heard, Heivia? In that crazy country, they climb up a mountain in midwinter just to see the same sun you can see anywhere else in the world and they even swim in the frozen sea in nothing but a loincloth. In that sense, this fits right in.”

“Then she needs to strip down to an Asian thong and jump into a lake around here!! I’ll warm her up afterwards!!”

“Hey, tell her that, not me! You’re scaring me!!”

Those potatoes could get into a fistfight over nothing, but perhaps they had instinctually sensed they would freeze solid if they stayed still.

Frolaytia ignored them and continued on.

As the important commanding officer, she had a thick bulletproof coat that kept her nice and warm.

“The training scenario is to eliminate the armed force occupying Mont Blanc Tunnel, a shortcut between safe countries that passes through Mont Blanc to bypass the rest of Alps. The Aggressors have set up bombs inside the tunnel and are threatening to blow up the tunnel so it caves in if their demands are not met. The tunnel is only 11km long, but without it, you have to take a 200km detour through the Alps. The economic losses during the holiday season would be around 1.5 billion euros, which is worth far more than all of our lives combined. Everyone, attempt this recovery mission with the utmost care.”

From beginning to end, the introduction was just about the last thing they wanted to hear. Why should they care about the economic effect? Their motivation would have been 100 times higher if they were told a tearful little girl or a sexy young wife was being held hostage in the tunnel.

“A helicopter will be sent out to draw the armed force’s attention while our attack team climbs the mountainside from below. The goal of the exercise is to retake the tunnel. Simply killing the enemy is meaningless. Make sure you gather enough information before making your attack. At the very least, you need to work out the type, number, and detonation method of the bombs and secretly neutralize them before the fight begins.”

“What about the Object?”

“The Princess is a poor match for this kind of delicate job and the Baby Magnum is too big to act as a useful threat. Thus, she will be focused on gathering information with her radar and sensors while also keeping our communication lines connected. This is about as deep inside a mountain as you can get in Europe, so don’t expect your radios to work like normal.”

The Princess was silently puffing out her cheeks in obvious displeasure. She may have felt like she was being left out.

But no matter how much they complained, the military obeyed a strict hierarchy. They could not defy Frolaytia’s decisions and this may have been the result of Frolaytia herself being powerless to reject an order from someone further up the chain of command. The 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion was disliked by so many people it was hard to narrow down the list of who might want to harass them like this.

At any rate, they had to get started.

The city of Chamonix was seen as the entranceway to Mont Blanc, but it was already 1000m up. The white mountain they were headed for was over 4800m up, but Quenser and the others were not equipped to climb that far. Mont Blanc Tunnel was a part of the highway system and building it too high up would have been inconvenient.

“The Alps are surprisingly well-maintained for having a bunch of deadly mountains like the Eiger

and the Jungfrau. Look, they've even got a cable car to the other side of the mountain."

"The Alps are like the holy land of skiing and mineral water. You need to study up on noble past times, Quenser. Gearing up and skiing down from 3500m up is pretty common around here."

"Who do you think the Aggressors in the tunnel are?"

"Whoever isn't with us here. Myonri would be a pretty dangerous option. She doesn't stand out at all, but she can do pretty much anything other than pilot an Object. You can never predict what she'll do next."

A bulky transport helicopter flew by over the two idiots' heads. A combination of a floodlight and a heavy machinegun was attached next to the slide door. Quenser let out a white breath while looking up at it.

"They sure are taking this exercise seriously. Can't they use that equipment to take out the Aggressors on their own?"

"In a real battle, they'd be too afraid of anti-air lasers to send in something like that. Also, if killing the enemies was enough here, I'd just cave in the tunnel. C'mon, let's get going."

They could see a humongous glacier clinging to the slope, but their workplace was in the area covered in soft snow below that. After climbing into the back of a canopied military truck, they rode to the scene along with the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers stuck doing the same thing.

"My friends back at school have got to be on winter vacation right now."

"Don't remind me. My family is probably relaxing in a lunar villa."

Their destination was Mont Blanc Tunnel, so the road was of course well maintained. But since the scenario said it was occupied by an armed force, they could not head straight to the tollgate at the entrance. Once the guide in the passenger seat spotted something through their binoculars, the truck came to a stop and the potatoes climbed out onto the roadside.

"They work fast. They've already got a camera set up?"

"There's just the one road in, so setting up traps would be easy."

They were focused on the tripod and camera placed on the curb. It was a lot like the device used to crack down on speeding drivers, but there was no one there with it. A long, long cable was connected it to some clay. The technology was not to blame. It only did what it was told. Just like criminal organizations would search out traitors using forensic techniques or hunt down people who

owed them money using facial recognition with social media photos and video sites.

“Now, a question: why aren’t they using drones, which would be even more convenient?”

“Because the mountain would reflect the signal to the point of uselessness. Not to mention the crosswinds and the cold. A toy’s rotors would lose their balance almost immediately and it would crash as soon as the axes froze.”

They discussed the matter while climbing over the guardrail and leaving the asphalt road. They had a panoramic view of the mountain, but the walkable paths were as limited as the veins on a leaf. They had no idea where they would run across any traps, so they were on the lookout for mines while climbing the slope. It was terrifying to think that the ubiquitous snow could be used to cover up traps.

The road itself zigzagged back and forth to climb the slope, so they only had to climb a few meters to complete their shortcut and reach the next higher level of asphalt.

They used the asphalt when that was an option and took shortcuts up the slope when there was a trap in the way.

After repeating the process a few times, their destination finally came into view.

“We have spotted the western tollgate of Mont Blanc Tunnel. No sign of any guards,” said Heivia.

They were in the parking lot of a log cabin rest area that looked like a combination of a small restaurant and souvenir shop.

However, this did not mean there was no one there. There could always be someone wielding a rifle past the tollgate or there could be a remote-controlled turret made from a camera and a swiveling heavy machinegun. For one thing, the criminals gained nothing by making an appearance when they were not making demands, making threats, or executing hostages. Doing so would be asking to be sniped.

Meanwhile, Quenser was already worn out, so he brushed the snow from the three steps up to the restaurant entrance and sat down.

“We’ve trained enough already. Gasp, pant. We’ve gotten stronger and gained some good experience, so let’s head back. Urp, I feel sick.”

“Grab your radio and say that again so Frolaytia can hear you while she scores us from her nice warm kotatsu, twig boy.”

“Heivia, you’re of noble blood, aren’t you? Set a good example for this exhausted commoner. By which I mean, carry me.”

“You can’t ask for noblesse oblige on demand!!”

It was currently sunset.

Even professional climbers would avoid climbing at night lest they become stranded, but soldiers like the potatoes were an exception.

And since disarming the bombs was a necessary part of retaking Mont Blanc Tunnel, they needed Quenser. They did have other people who could use explosives, but keeping as many of those people with them as possible was best. That way another could take over if one was lost in an attack.

Also, the tunnel was 11km long, so it would take more than just one or two people to search out all the bombs. On the other hand, they would be spotted if they moved in with too large a group.

“Looks like we have to use this restaurant as a base, split into a few teams, and head in with a time delay.”

“Do I really have to go?” asked Quenser. “It says right here the cheese fondue at this place is good.”

His desperate plea was rejected with a fist.

Quenser and Heivia were part of the lead group, but they did not head straight for the tollgate. A highway tunnel was sure to have emergency exits and smoke vents. They had plenty of ways to sneak in without using the dangerous front door.

“They do remote surgeries over fiber optic cable these days, so can’t I just give you instructions while you do the work?” asked Quenser. “Y’know, you could wear some kind of mech glove or something.”

“Try to get me to use something like that and I’m siding with the terrorists. To tear down the entire goddamn system.”

They left the asphalt road and started up the snowy slope again.

It did not take long to find an emergency exit seemingly cut out of the slope, but Heivia crouched down there. He tore off the end of a soap-like ration and tossed the piece toward that exit.

A slipper-sized creature chased after it while squeaking.

"No reaction to the rat. Looks like there's no one there. No wires or IR either. Well, assuming they aren't set up above knee level."

"That thing's huge! If I die here, will I have all the flesh stripped from my bones by those things?"

The transport helicopter passed noisily by overhead. Since their allies were drawing the Aggressor's attention, Quenser's group finally entered the emergency exit.

Once inside, they found bright fluorescent lights that still left the place looking dimly lit.

"Ugh, it's so cold."

"Waiting around in here couldn't be fun. Glad I wasn't chosen for the Aggressor side."

It felt like a refrigerated warehouse.

The bare concrete must not have stored heat well because the inside felt chillier than the snowy night outside.

These emergency exits had to be installed every so often throughout the tunnel, but the tunnel ran through the highest mountain in the Alps. Simply adding a door was not enough to get out. That meant there had to be a smaller pedestrian tunnel that branched off from the main one.

"This tunnel is so narrow and straight. There's nowhere to hide in a shootout."

"I don't see any bombs."

Quenser sounded a little too carefree, so his awful friend gave him a skeptical look.

"Hey, you aren't letting your guard down just cause it's training, are you? We're only 30 seconds in, so you aren't going to claim to be psychic now, are you?"

"There's no way they could use a radio signal in this thick tunnel, right? The armed force is stuck in here for an indefinite amount of time, so they also wouldn't use time bombs that will detonate on their own eventually. That means a wired signal is the only option left. As long as we don't see a bunch of thick wires bundled together, there are no bombs and we're safe."

That meant the disarming work would be in the main tunnel.

"Should we wait for the others?"

“When we have no idea when a door is going to burst open and masked soldiers will rush out at us?”

They slowly approached a metal door, checked for traps, and then cracked it open.

The one-way three-lane main tunnel was filled with orange light. They stuck just a mobile device through the cracked door and used its camera to view things out there. There were no obvious signs of people, so they opened the door the rest of the way and walked in.

Heivia aimed his assault rifle toward the tollgate at the closer entrance, but...

“Hm? There’s no one there. So where are the Aggressors lying in wait???”

Quenser looked down at his feet instead of deeper into the tunnel.

A long, long cable ran alongside the wall at the far end of the curb meant for broken down cars. It started at the tunnel’s tollgate and continued in from there.

“Found the bombs.”

Clay was attached low on the wall at even more frequent intervals than the landline emergency phones.

They were puzzle-like devices similar to those seen in movies, so this was not something often seen on the battlefield. Setting them up and disarming them took a lot of effort and a small impact could set them off, so the shaking of artillery fire could trigger them unexpectedly. (From a purely logical rather than emotional standpoint) this type was useful for setting up a time bomb that gave you enough time to escape outside the expected checkpoint area while also preventing the police from disarming them if they were discovered early. If you could detonate them remotely and immediately at any time, this design was entirely meaningless. You could just hit the switch once the bomb squad got close.

This time, they were inside an 11km tunnel.

First of all, there were a lot of them.

They used a wired detonation mechanism and all of the bombs had to be detonated at once.

Which meant...

“Fiber optic cable. I’m guessing they’re using a computer chip for the detonator.”

“Meaning?”

“We don’t have to use a knife or wire cutters to disarm every single one of these. Let’s find a way to destroy that chip. For example, if we sent powerful magnetism through the tunnel from one end to the other, it would neutralize all of the bombs set up along here.”

“Like a microwave oven?”

“High power microwaves would cause a malfunction in the delicate fuses and make them go boom, so instead-”

Quenser trailed off and stopped moving.

The delinquent noble frowned.

“What’s wrong, twig boy?”

“Hey, Heivia? This was surprise combat training, right?”

“Yeah?”

“While plastic explosives are relatively stable, they wouldn’t use real bombs for an exercise, would they? But this one-”

A heavy metallic sound rang out just then.

The cover to one of the drainage ditches popped up and then a soldier with his face hidden by a mask and helmet aimed a submachinegun their way.

Heivia fired a quick burst from his assault rifle, but the rubber bullets did not stop the man. Pissed, Heivia fired the rubber bullets toward the man’s forehead.

“Dammit man, follow the rules!!”

While the masked man’s skull was shaken, Heivia swung the stock of his rifle into the side of his head to finally knock him down.

Heivia tore off the collapsed soldier’s helmet and mask to see who this rule-breaker was.

“Hey, who’s this guy? I’ve never seen him before.”

The 37th alone had nearly 1000 people in it, so they would not recognize every single person there, but this man had a tattoo on his face. Some units would have everyone get the same tattoo to increase solidarity, but Frolaytia did not let the 37th do that.

Quenser used his mobile device to snap photos of the bomb and the collapsed man.

“Heivia, check his gun. Specifically, the bullets he’s using.”

“?”

“This bomb and its fuse really are real! This thing will go off, so this isn’t just training!!”

Loud gunfire erupted further down the tunnel.

The Legitimacy Kingdom issued 5.56mm rounds (supposedly anyway), but the enclosed tunnel meant the gunfire was earsplitting even at a decent distance.

However, who was fighting who?

The two idiots should have been the only attackers inside the tunnel at this point.

Quenser looked over in a panic, but Heivia grabbed his shoulders and dove toward the wall. He opened the metal door back to the emergency exit and used it as a shield.

Someone walked briskly out from deeper in the tunnel.

They were soaked from head to toe in the blood of their enemies.

“Elise?”

“Hey, what’s that she’s holding? That’s not the assault rifle we were issued.”

The two idiots watched as Elise Montana raised the carbine she held in one hand and aimed it straight up.

With a loud burst of gunfire, a bloody masked soldier fell along with the cover to a smoke vent duct on the ceiling.

“You need to get out of here. Hurry.”

Her voice was scratchy.

Either she was out of ammo or the barrel had gotten bent in the intense fighting earlier because the busty blonde glasses woman did not hesitate to throw aside the carbine. Strangely, she formed a smile on her lips.

“This training has been hijacked. They really do intend to detonate the bombs!!”

Part 2

From the far end of the tunnel to their end, the bombs detonated one after another, like a crowd doing the wave.

Part 3

It must have been a split-second decision.

“!!”

Heivia drew the large knife from his hip and threw it to sever the fiber optic cable crawling across the ground. Quenser grabbed and tugged on the slender hand of that busty blonde who was bloody even though it was not that time of the month.

With the direct wiring cut, the bombs stopped detonating at that point.

Nevertheless, the entire tunnel was blocked off. The blast of wind created by the explosions pushed in toward them like the cleaning of a bath pipe.

They all ran toward the emergency exit.

Fortunately, the door opened outward from their perspective. Otherwise, the blast would have torn it from its hinges and the immense pressure would have slammed it into them.

“What happened to the others?”

“...”

“What happened to the training!?”

Quenser asked those questions while sitting on the floor and holding her close, but Elise did not respond. A mystery group had taken over the tunnel and they had set up real bombs instead of fake ones. They also had real guns. Quenser and Heivia did not know how many Aggressors there had

been waiting in the tunnel for the training, but it was a miracle that even Elise had survived.

The blonde glasses woman handed Quenser something with her bloody hand.

He looked down to see it was the same kind of mobile device they used, but he doubted it was hers.

“I stole this from a defeated enemy. I don’t know the passcode, so I didn’t try to get in. I don’t want the data being erased if I get it wrong too many times.”

“An enemy, huh? They were wearing Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms, but they had a weird tattoo on their face.”

Quenser opened his own mobile device and accessed the photos he had taken before the explosion. The type of bomb and the type of computer chip they used would be crucial hints, but he was focused on the face of that masked man instead.

“Oh,” said Elise. “A snake entwined around a branch. That’s the symbol of the 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion, I think.”

“Hold on.” Something occurred to Quenser. “The passcode changes every week, but isn’t there a pattern to it? The base number is random, but it’s altered with the date and the unit number like 37 or 21 to produce the final passcode. Although I’ve heard the commander and technicians are given different numbers to make it more complex.”

That did not tell them the actual code, but the 37th alone had nearly 1000 members. Central command was not going to work out a bunch of different passcodes and distribute them to everyone. Basically, it was the same as the handcuff keys used by the police. They were meant to prevent outsiders from unlocking them, but members of the same unit, department, or rank were considered trustworthy. They had to accept some level of automated passcode generation.

And it was not like all the data would be deleted from just one wrong passcode.

Quenser tried recalculating the passcode and punched it in. It worked.

“That actually worked?”

“But most of the data looks corrupted,” said Elise.

There were a few surviving files inside, but not many would open. Each individual file needed its own passcode on top of the overall device’s one. That must have been set manually, so they had no clues to go on.

However...

“Body File?”

Quenser noticed a term that appeared frequently in the unopenable filenames.

“What does that mean? It shows up so frequently I assume it must be important.”

Necessity of Secrecy Regarding the Body File

Matters Concerning Erasure of the Body File.

ROE: Upon Outside Discovery of the Body File.

It was all couched in stiff, businesslike language, but it sounded very dangerous. They seemed to be taking a strict “dead men tell no tales” stance here.

“Let’s wait till we get back to the maintenance base to continue with this. They might be able to find the password or recover the corrupted files.” Heivia tossed aside his paint magazine despite the rounds remaining and loaded a magazine of real bullets instead. “Something’s up here, but we can’t contact our busty commander without use of the radio. There’s no point in staying in the tunnel, so let’s head on out. The unexploded ordnance in here is scaring the hell out of me regardless.”

Mont Blanc Tunnel had been rendered useless, so they had to use the emergency exit tunnel to leave.

“God, this unit really knows how to ruin the holidays, be it New Year’s or summer vacation.”

“Heivia, this might not be over yet. We don’t know how far this goes.”

They left the tall rectangular entrance cut out of the mountain slope and stepped outside.

And there they saw what was happening.

The Princess was fighting.

The colossal forms of two Objects were exchanging intense artillery fire while clinging to the white slope of the highest mountain in the Alps.

Part 4

Shortly before that...

"It's started, Princess."

"Hmph."

"Yes, this put our allies in danger, but it was a necessary military action. Please don't pout like that."

Frolaytia Capistrano let out a white sigh.

There appeared to be some hidden intentions at play in the commotion over Immortanoid, the artificial element disguised as a rare earth. But whatever it was, it was unclear who had set up the game. If nothing was done, they would have to live out their lives fearing assassins at every turn.

So...

"We had to lure them out."

"That's what Mont Blanc was for?" asked the Princess.

"This is a blank zone on the border between large safe countries. It is relatively out of sight despite how much traffic passes through, so you could send in a large unit and silence us without having to worry about witnesses. It's perfect. Almost too perfect."

"I am detecting a tremor. There seems to have been an explosion inside the Mont Blanc Tunnel."

"I know I said the economic effect would be 1.5 billion euros for just the end of the holiday season, but if that was true, we never could have sealed it off for training."

The real battle started here.

They had drawn out their true enemy, so they just had to crush them and get them to explain what was going on behind the scenes.

"Princess, you get ready too. The satellite is detecting an enemy Object."

"But there's nothing on my radar."

"Because you're on the ground. The enemy is on the opposite side of Mont Blanc. It's probably a Second Generation specialized for use in the mountains, so it can climb over to your side like it's ski

jumping.”

“The altitude up here is more than 4800m, isn't it?”

“Not many Objects can pull off something like that. We are hurrying the video analysis, but unless it is disguised in some way, we're pretty sure we know who this is.”

Since this was a conspiracy related to rare earths, the most likely suspect was the money-obsessed Capitalist Corporations.

That was who Frolaytia Capistrano had been focused on, but...

“The enemy is the Legitimacy Kingdom Second Generation Crystal Scrying. Some fragmentary battle records were still left in the shallow levels of the military servers. That's the one that went on a rampage over the buried treasure that the East India Company left behind when they withdrew from the area.”

In other words, it was one of theirs.

Frolaytia held her long, narrow kiseru in her mouth as she continued.

“More accurately, this is the 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion. I said the rich people hiding their money by converting it into Immortanoid were found in all four world powers, didn't I? So it shouldn't surprise us to find fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers stabbing us in the back.”

Part 5

Heivia Winchell groaned to himself after learning what had happened via radio.

“I'm getting back alive no matter what it takes. I swear I'm stripping that busty commander naked, wrapping her in duct tape, and leaving her in a park bathroom.”

“We now know our opponent can use enough bombs to cause Mont Blanc Tunnel to cave in,” said Frolaytia over the radio. “Would you prefer to live your life terrified of being blown up in a terrorist attack whether you were in a safe country or a battlefield country? Plus, the enemy is part of the Legitimacy Kingdom, so they could waltz right into the maintenance base if they wanted to.”

Frolaytia had essentially dragged the crocodile up out of the river. They knew they could not defeat it while it was hidden below the water, but they were the ones who would get bitten if they tried to change that. The two idiots vowed to survive this. She could make all the excuses she liked in that public bathroom that reeked of ammonia.

“Frolaytia, does the term Body File mean anything to you!?” asked Quenser.

“Where did you hear that?”

“On a mobile device that Elise stole from one of them. But the files themselves require separate passwords, so we can’t open them.”

“Bring that here. The electronic simulation division can break into it.”

“Could I just transmit the encrypted data to you now!?”

“You haven’t tried yet, have you? With some kinds of security, attempting to transmit it without entering the password will destroy the data. We don’t know what kind the 21st uses, so physically bring it to us.”

That level of caution showed Frolaytia understood the importance of that data.

“What we need now is information. I want to know what is going on behind the scenes,” she said. “You can let the Princess handle the Object! But with her firepower, I have my doubts we can take the Pilot Elite alive. That device is important, but also search out a few 21st soldiers on the ground there!!”

“Is this really the time to focus on other things!?” shouted Heivia while looking up at the white slope.

This was not a metropolis flooded with light. They were in the middle of nature, so there were no real light sources at night. However, that thing was so enormous they could still see its silhouette.

The enemy was also from the Legitimacy Kingdom.

The 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion supported the Second Generation Crystal Scrying.

It probably used the same static electricity propulsion device as the Princess instead of an air cushion. It could generally be classified as a multi-legged type, but those legs were not even. The front legs were abnormally large and branched off, while the back legs looked like they could not possibly support that giant thing. The front legs were reminiscent of a stag beetle because they spread out to the sides from the front of the spherical main body and then gathered back in toward the center again. They were something like diamond-shaped scissors.

The main cannons...may have been the boxy containers on either side of the main body. Each side had a cannon made from strapping four barrels together.

“What is that? Is it combining them to increase the power and accuracy, or does it fire them in turn to reduce the lag of reloading and cooling???”

That question was soon answered.

The container-style main cannons on the left and right angled diagonally upward.

Then something happened.

Their eyes could not keep up with a metal shell flying at 5 or 10 times the speed of sound, but if they could trust the long, narrow contrails that seemed to slice across Mont Blanc...

“They curved!?”

A tremor seemed to shake the entire mountain and the slope’s white makeup was stripped away. Avalanches occurred all across the mountain.

“What in the hell!? Those contrails mean those must be railguns or coilguns instead of lasers, but those main cannons curved partway through!”

A total of 8 shots had been fired.

The hypersonic shells attacked simultaneously from the left and right like enormous jaws snapping shut.

Luck was the only reason the Princess had not been blown away the first time it did that. In their high-speed battles, Objects would begin taking evasive action in advance by detecting the slight movements of the lenses and barrels, but that was based on the assumption that the shells would fly straight. That method was no use for shells that could freely fly around in the sky like this. Not even a pro boxer could respond if their opponent’s second threw a beer bottle at them from the side while they were focused on their opponent’s eyeline and fists. This was the same.

The Baby Magnum had not escaped unscathed.

One of its seven main cannons had been torn off and one end of its spherical main body had split open like a flower blossom.

“We need to get out of here.”

“Heivia.”

“That busty commander clearly screwed the pooch this time!! She lied to us to draw out the enemy, but now that we’ve found that enemy, they’re going to chew us up and spit us out! The secret behind Immortanoid? The Body File? We never should have dragged this up out of the water, so why couldn’t we have just let sleeping dogs lie!?”

Another left and right pair of four metal shells tried to tear into the Princess’s Baby Magnum.

It was a close shave.

But in that case, why was the Princess still alive? It could not have been a fluke the second time.

“It uses threads,” said that lovely girl’s voice over the radio. “Probably fiber optic cables. It seems to fire railgun shells with wires attached so it can manually move the tail fins to alter its course in midair. But knowing that doesn’t help much. We need to find some kind of weakness.”

That was insane. It might seem like you could manually change the course of a railgun shell by attaching a camera and tail fins, but these were moving at Mach 5 or even 10. Only streamlines would be visible at that speed. Even with fiber optic cable, the pilot would only have a fraction of a second to think between the launch and the hit. Yet the 21st’s Pilot Elite was pulling it off. It only took them a split second to manage image reconstruction on a higher level than police drive recorder analysis that required the full use of a supercomputer and AI.

This went beyond the Object itself.

The Elite piloting it was a monster as well.

Heivia shook his head. He judged this hopeless and then pointed toward the avalanche falling due to the rumbling of the cannon fire.

No, he was probably pointing toward where some of the 37th’s people were gathered. The Crystal Scrying must have included that in the calculations when deciding on a course for its shells. The only possible explanation was that it had fired the right shells toward the Princess and fired the remaining left ones toward the humans on the ground.

“It is focusing on light.” The Princess spoke clearly over the radio. “Radar is not very reliable up here in the mountains and its own cannons are too loud to use microphones. That means using visual images should be the easiest method.”

“What are you basing this on!?”

“It’s aiming for you all instead of a large target like me because you’re pulling out your radios and mobile devices. The shine of a pilot light or backlight is enough for it.”

That thought froze Quenser's heart.

He wanted to throw the device away immediately, but that was not an option.

"Even the smallest light can lead to death, so the moonlight and city lights can be a threat too," continued the Princess. "Since it isn't using night vision, I can only assume the Elite's own calculations can't keep up with that. Quenser, I am going to fire a shot toward Chamonix to destroy the unmanned transformer substation on the outskirts and cause a power outage. You should be able to hide in the darkness then."

"G-got it."

"If that isn't enough, you can always play dead. If you try that, make sure you aren't anywhere near the light, okay?"

"I promise you we'll save you, so wait for us."

He heard a quiet breath from his radio that would summon death.

It sounded like the girl laughing.

Then a coilgun blast flew seemingly in the wrong direction to blow away the civilian transformer substation.

Everything was enveloped by a true and natural darkness void of all artificial intervention.

Part 6

Frolaytia Capistrano and the other officers were gathered in a conference room within the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's maintenance base zone.

They had a reason for inviting the electronic simulation division and the intelligence division to the meeting.

"Let us review the situation." The busty silver-haired commander waggled her long, narrow kiseru. "Our enemy is the Legitimacy Kingdom's 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion and their Crystal Scrying. The higher ups must be aware of this clash with our own, but I doubt they will order a ceasefire."

"U-um," said the confused female officer who stood by Frolaytia's side like a secretary. She may have thought it was best to make a suggestion to the higher ups even if it was hopeless, but...

“Those in the home country know the 37th and 21st are clashing, but they are not sure which side is disobeying orders here. That means they are unsure which side to aim at and demand to stop. All this snow will have long since thawed if we wait for them to send in the Black Uniforms or a third-party inquiry committee to thoroughly investigate everything to their satisfaction. If we want to survive, we need to act here and now.”

Frolaytia of course had no intention of simply relying on the Baby Magnum and the soldiers on the scene. She was the one who had used such extreme methods to lure out this enemy.

In addition to the military fight, she had to crush them with what influence she had.

She slowly blew out some sweet smoke as she continued.

“The 21st’s commander is Bullrank Happy-Youth, right? As you can see, he’s a pale and scrawny guy. Based on his musculature, he must be the type of soldier who never leaves his desk.”

A photo of the individual in question was projected onto a wall of the conference room.

This was a pro and a con of fighting another Legitimacy Kingdom unit. There was no real reason to be refused access to data on an ally...but the 21st could search for information on the 37th and Frolaytia in the same way.

They would have to add on countless pieces of information branching off from that one photo.

The busty silver-haired woman glanced over at the electronic simulation division.

“What personal information do we have on him? It could be anything: his bank account, a relationship with someone other than his wife, or even an unusual hobby.”

If Bullrank negotiated with the higher ups and had them overlook his misdeeds in order to delay a ceasefire order, they would have to silence him using some personal compromising information instead.

But all the unwarlike geeks shook their heads.

“That isn’t going to work.”

“Are you saying he’s lived such a perfect life that you can’t find anything on him?”

“No, it’s the opposite. Through social media, we can find a few things he probably does not want getting out like receiving a parking ticket in a hotel district you wouldn’t expect him to be in or like

there being a false bottom in the trunk of the car he secretly ordered for the maintenance factory, but it's all too normal. All of his flaws are kept at the perfect level where it looks like normal proclivities and normal suspicions that he can explain away to his wife as a normal misunderstanding. In fact, it's so perfect I can only assume this was constructed after the fact."

If you knew how rumors and data spread through the modern digital society, you could use it to your advantage. Whether in an analog or digital format, you could "set things up" to make yourself look a certain way to the people around you. However, that was a technique used by Councilors trying to avoid scandals. It was not the kind of information security used in the military, even by an officer.

"This goes deeper than I thought. He would make a mistake eventually on his own, so he must have an ally in the government offices."

"What about civilian investigators?"

The paparazzi would chase around more than just those in the entertainment business. Once someone reached a high enough rank in the military, they would often have cameramen following them around.

An intelligence officer in black responded with a shrug.

"Over the past three years, three freelance reporters sniffing around Bullrank Happy-Youth's business ended up dying in seemingly natural ways. That smells incredibly fishy, but they must have dealt with things in such a way that you could dig into it for a century without finding anything definitive."

"..."

That meant there was a secret there worth killing over.

They might find something there if they spent 6 months to a year investigating it, but they did not have that kind of time. If they could not announce checkmate and end this battle somehow or another, their unit would be wiped out.

"This protection only applies to Bullrank Happy-Youth. I don't know what he did to get the higher ups on his side, but breaking through that barrier would be difficult on such short notice."

"Then what do we do?"

"But what about whoever is helping him protect his information like this? He has to have more than just one or two helpers in the government offices and nothing says all of them are doing the best job they can. You said his fabricated records are on social media too, right? Then send the social media companies a message saying their server has suffered a cyber attack. The people behind the

fabrication won't want their handiwork discovered, so they'll want to act quickly to avoid an in-house investigation by the social media companies."

Part 7

First, they wrapped plastic tape around their radios to cover up the pilot lights. That was good enough there, but the mobile devices were trickier since those would be useless if they covered up the LCD screen.

"We can't use these anymore."

Opening Quenser's or the one Elise had stolen from a 21st soldier would be suicide. They had to put off figuring out whatever the Body File was. It was irritating to no end to have the answer in their hands but being unable to look at it. Especially when they were being pursued and a single wrong choice would mean having their lives snuffed out like a candle.

"Then how are we supposed to check the map?" asked Heivia. "Even pro climbers avoid traveling in the mountains at night and this is the highest mountain in the Alps! Wandering around without knowing where to climb will obviously be suicide!!"

"We can't read a paper map without light either, can we?" added Elise.

"This is insane! I'm heading back! There's an asphalt road right over there, so I can follow it as it zigzags down to Chamonix. I'm leaving!!"

That was when they heard a sound much like fireworks being launched.

The basic idea was the same as ordinary fireworks. These were known as parachute fireworks.

Except instead of a weight, these were attached to magnesium that scattered a bright white light similar to welding.

"Flares!?"

"Get down, Heivia. We're dead if they see us!!"

Light shined down like on a baseball field during a night game. Quenser and Heivia hid behind a conifer tree and Heivia dove into the dark shadow cast by a large boulder. This was dangerous, but if they focused on the location of the light source, the unnaturally dark shadows worked in their favor.

The shrill squealing from the ground may have been hibernating marmots that had awoken in surprise.

Modern electronic assault rifle scopes could do IR and night vision, but activating those assistance features could produce enough light to give away their position. Allowing light to leak out entirely defeated the purpose of night vision, but it was a fairly common mistake in the goggle type due to defects in the rubber caps that covered the eyes.

Quenser clicked his tongue while sharing a single tree's shadow with the busty glasses woman he held in his arms.

The Body File.

He did not know what it was, but the 21st had attacked in violation of the military regulations once they decided Quenser's group had found it. And that decision had happened before Elise had stolen that mobile device. He could not guess what had triggered this, but the other side would not have overlooked it.

Was it all a misunderstanding, or had they stepped on a landmine without noticing it?

Either way, they were dead if they were located. Even if they threw down their weapons and put their hands up, they would only be blasted to smithereens.

They could not step out from behind the trees as long as the magnesium and other light sources were shining so brightly on their surroundings. And it did not look like they had time to wait for the parachutes to slowly descend to the ground.

"Heivia, can you shoot down those parachutes!?"

"Have you lost your mind!? I could, but the gunshot and muzzle flash would give away our position!!"

"The infantrymen that launched those flares are down here on the ground. If they get close, we're done for!"

(So Heivia's too much of a chicken to help.)

Some shrill squeaking ran between his legs.

It came from a slipper-sized rat, but while he felt fear clutching at his heart, the animal's oddly-timed warning cry produced no reaction from the colossus in the distance.

He leaned his back against the thick conifer tree while still holding Elise in his arms.

(The Crystal Scrying is focused on light. It isn't scanning using sound.)

"Sorry, Elise."

"What?"

"I'm going to knock over this tree to take out the flare overhead along with it. That will take out their vision!!"

"Whaaat!? Um, then we won't have a shield."

There was no time to listen to complaints. He stabbed an electric fuse into a Hand Axe plastic explosive and attached it to the thick trunk protecting them.

The blast had a range of 2 meters.

He reached up to attach the clay fairly high up and then lay flat on the ground with Elise to just barely remain out of harm's way.

The loud boom caused their eardrums to briefly forget how to function.

With a creaking sound, the tall conifer tree fell inwards and caught the small parachute supporting the flare still floating overhead. Once it was crushed, the bright light vanished too.

But two unfamiliar people were already racing toward them. One held a transparent shield in one hand and a one-handed machine pistol in the other. The one approaching from a little further back held a carbine that looked like a shortened assault rifle. If they tried to shoot these enemies, the shield would block it and the return gunfire would turn them to Swiss cheese.

Quenser grabbed some clay and raised his voice.

"Get out here, Heivia! Fight, you moron!!"

And...

"Hh!!"

He heard a sharp breath from Elise who he thought he had pushed to the ground.

She pushed the boy up with a knee kick and used the momentum of sitting up to throw a large knife.

She aimed at the shin which was easily overlooked when holding that kind of shield. She showed no mercy even against a fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldier. Once the knife scored a clean hit and the 21st infantryman collapsed to the ground, Elise ran over, swiped the weapon from the enemy's holster, and aimed it at the carbine-wielding enemy further back.

She had not stolen the machine pistol.

This weapon was forcibly kept at the size of a handgun while having a barrel as thick as a shotgun.

"A flare gun!?"

The light meant to be fired straight up was launched horizontally instead. It struck the second 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion soldier in the center of the chest.

"Gah, ah!?"

This was the same as a commercial parachute firework, so it was not deadly. The man aimed his carbine at Elise with the light source sticking into the bulletproof plates covering his chest.

"This isn't over. The Body File must not be made public!!"

But he should not have forgotten what the Second Generation Crystal Scrying used to decide who to target.

"Wait, what!? No, I'm not the-"

His cry of sorrow was erased.

A metal shell flew along a complex path and ultimately dropped down from above like a bolt of lightning with enough force to obliterate a human-sized mass. The hit sent powerful shockwaves scattering in every direction, so Quenser's group was blown backwards again.

Quenser had an awful headache and could not figure out how he was still alive.

He felt something odd while lying on the ground, so he wiped off his brow with the back of his hand and found something white and hard had stabbed into him there. It appeared to be one of the enemy soldier's front teeth. That was so creepy he nearly vomited.

But regardless...

"The light source has been eliminated."

Was this really something they could walk away from like they were crushing a cigarette butt below their heel? This was far worse than simple bad manners.

Quenser's ringing ears picked up on a sound.

In addition to the squealing of the small animals running around, he heard a woman speaking in such an icy voice it sent a chill down his spine.

"Now, we need to leave this place while we still can. We must utilize this opportunity."

"Elise?"

The Aggressors in Mont Blanc Tunnel had taken devastating damage in a surprise attack from the 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion, but come to think of it, how had Elise survived?

She had previously been used so cruelly as a shield and bait, so how had she managed to return alive each and every time? She was always tearful on the surface, but she never seemed surprised by her own survival.

Why was that?

Also, she was a very attractive glasses woman. If a busty blonde like her had been living in the same maintenance base zone as him, there was no way he would not have noticed, yet he had first learned of her existence in the Arctic.

"Since when can you fight like that? Who are you?"

"Ah ha ha. I arrived to fulfill a request from Major Frolaytia Capistrano who wanted to increase the average lifespan of her battalion members who rely too heavily on their Object and don't know how to adlib." She gave a quick salute while holding the machine handgun she had also stolen from the enemy. "I am Sergeant Elise Montana. My specialty is the military band...but I am also proficient in marksmanship, close-quarters combat, and every other skill necessary for the army special forces. I am an instructor for the 7th Special Training Unit and I was sent to the 37th from the Legitimacy Kingdom home country"

Part 8

It was undeniable that the hurdles toward becoming a soldier had dropped considerably with the introduction of the clean wars. A lot of soldiers were sent to a maintenance base after spending only around half a year learning to use a gun and more as a game than anything. And for that matter, people like Quenser were not even soldiers; they were students.

So what good was a Special Training Unit in an age like that?

They were the elite of the elite who recruited promising individuals from within the military and gave them additional training to become the kind of special forces seen in movies. That additional training was not something you could complete just by spending enough time on it like with low-wage part-time work. There were documentaries on the harsh training those people underwent, but it was best described as giving them harsh external stimuli to change them. There was a famous story about a safe country comedian known for his crazy stunts explaining with a straight face how it had been too much for him: "I've ridden some creature I couldn't even identify, I've done a reverse bungee jump in the nude, and I've even been tricked into going into outer space, but the training I attended there is the one thing I couldn't handle." A strange survey even said the best way to get a stubborn child to go to bed at their bedtime was to tell them a lady from the Special Training Unit would come for them if they stayed up late.

Heivia looked dejected after regrouping with the others.

"Does that busty commander want to kill us? What did we ever do to her? I heard anyone who has received the 'TLC' of the Special Training Unit ends up being a monster who can trek across the Northern Restricted Zone barefoot. So even without all this trouble she got us into, she was already planning to work us to death this holiday season."

"No, um, I think Major Capistrano did this because she cares about you! It has apparently been bothering her how quickly she goes through soldiers, so she pulled some diplomatic strings to ask the 7th for some skills training."

"Hold on! Does that mean that Santa mission was a set up too!? You purposefully got the higher ups mad at us so you could train us on that hellish holiday tour!?"

"(Well, um, that was really just a mistake on my part and that made it hard to come out and explain who I am or why I'm here. No, I should probably keep that part a secret.)"

"Elise, did you just about let something crucial slip out there???"

The two idiots might have normally put her in some tortoise shell bondage and kicked her down the snowy slope, but they did not feel quite so comfortable doing so now that their relative positions were so unclear.

Also, there were plenty of things they were more worried about at the moment.

"Um, Elise? What if - hypothetically speaking! - what if - heh heh, eh heh heh - we said we don't want that skills training?"

"I happen to know the perfect way of waking up my adorable students when they start daydreaming about silly things like having a say in the matter. Soaking up to the shoulders in an ice bath for 30 minutes will erase most naïve delusions from the mind□"

Quenser's balls shriveled up more than any other time that year.

The glasses woman grinned.

“(Don't think I have forgotten how you treated me all this time.)”

“Teach, you need to have a carrot to go along with the stick!! Where's our reward!?”

This was the kind of brainwashing that would kill people. If they obeyed Elise, they would probably become the perfect soldiers, but they would also lose their free will as a human being. They were not about to live a life of adoring those boobs while shouting “yes, ma'am” with utterly pure and vacant expressions on their faces. They wanted those boobs as a standalone product, not part of a dangerous package deal.

But anyway...

“So, Elise, does your position outside of the 37th tell you anything about what the Body File is?”

“Unfortunately, no. Due to the 7th Special Training Unit's unique position, we exist outside the standard military hierarchy. After all, we are meant to train people, not fight on the battlefield. That Body File sounds like part of some kind of conspiracy, but I have no idea what it is.”

Quenser was not skilled enough to tell if she was lying or not, but he decided it was unlikely she would be hiding some secret here. For one thing, they never would have seen the term without the mobile device she had stolen from the 21st. Even if they had stepped on the landmine itself without realizing it, Elise could have just not given them that device if she was trying to hide it.

“The enemy is working with their Second Generation to kill us by hunting down any light source on the mountain,” said Quenser. “We'll be trapped like rats even if we try to play dead here. We need to get away from here and find a weakness in the Crystal Scrying before they can close in on us.”

“Are you serious?”

Heivia quickly got down on the snow after hearing rotors beating the air overhead.

A military tiltrotor was aiming a searchlight around. It had probably carried a bunch of soldiers and snowmobiles from the opposite eastern side of Mont Blanc. Its bulky shape looked somehow brazen because it was showing off its belly while the Princess was still out there fighting with so many anti-air lasers at her disposal.

Heivia continued speaking while waiting for it to pass.

“Information on Object’s is as classified as it gets. We aren’t going to find a manual lying around on the mountain somewhere!! And that crazy-suspicious Body File thing is probably hidden in some vault or on a classified server. It isn’t mineral water, so it isn’t going to well up from the ground when we dig a hole here in the Alps!!”

“Elise.”

“Oh, yes. When a student’s innate determination is insufficient, it is a teacher’s duty to kindly increase it for them. Shall I start by sticking a firecracker up your ass?”

“Okay, I’ll do it, so please no!! Do you not know how the male body works, you ditzy teacher!? There’s an etiquette to teasing that part of our anatomy!”

They started on an advanced and specialized topic of conversation, but they could easily imagine what they needed first if they were to get some information on the 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

Sexy Teacher (of the gentle and clumsy type) Elise Montana stated the simplest way to get the information they craved.

“We need a soldier from the 21st. The previous ones were blown to bits, but let’s leave the next ones more intact so we can actually speak with them.”

“I’m not sure they’ll be willing to talk.”

“Getting everything out of them might be difficult, but we may be able to get the passwords for the individual files on the mobile device.”

“Why do I have to spend my holiday fighting fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers and hunting down filthy old men? We’re in the European wilderness, so can’t we at least run across a slender, long-eared elf?”

That said, it was a simple answer. If they wanted to know about the 21st, it was best to ask someone from the 21st. And since the 21st was attacking the 37th with delight, they could hardly complain if they were counterattacked by those would-be victims.

But the 21st was not going to show up on their own.

Well, they would, but giving the 21st the initiative would mean being surrounded and waiting for certain death.

They had to make the move themselves.

They were in the complete darkness of a snowy mountain at night. Plus, they were not on a single route up to a log cabin or to the peak, so they had to wander around until they found their prey. The risks were endless: falling, slipping, getting lost, hypothermia, and ferocious animals awoken from hibernation. A mountain climbing guide might question their sanity if they heard about it.

“Okay, let’s get started.”

With that, they began their walk through hell.

Nowhere was safe. Snow blown from the slope created a cloud like cotton candy not far away. And that cloud formed an unnaturally straight line.

One of the 21st’s tiltrotors was flying just off the ground to intentionally scatter the snow. Just like a summer mist shower, the small snow crystals would cause vaporization heat and make the already freezing mountain feel even colder. Once the 37th’s potatoes could stand it no longer and used a fire to warm up, the Crystal Scrying would fire on them.

If they toughed it out, they would freeze to death. If they tried to warm themselves, they would be blown up.

The enemy was using unorthodox hunting methods here because the soldiers feared being held responsible if they tried to do everything as instructed and screwed it up. The 21st no longer saw any chance of them losing.

And in fact, the Princess did not seem to have the focus to spare to save her allies on the ground. Even if she did shoot down the tiltrotor with an anti-air laser, the flaming wreckage would only act as a giant light source. It would only make the 37th’s soldiers suffer even more.

Was the Body File really this important?

They had no idea what it was and had no way of knowing if they really had stepped on that landmine or if the 21st was simply mistaken.

Elise Montana kept walking even as she clenched her teeth at being unable to help the allies she saw suffering so close by.

“The 21st is getting carried away,” she said while taking the lead. “Because they caught us by surprise and are in fact keeping pace with their planned schedule. Also, hunters cannot truly hide themselves. Once they start viewing the fleeing enemy as their prey, the biggest threat becomes friendly fire instead of the enemy’s small fangs or claws. So even when hiding, they need some way of saying ‘I am here, so do not shoot me by mistake’.”

Quenser and Heivia may not have seen it since they were following after that glasses woman’s butt,

but Elise Montana gently licked her lips while wielding the stolen machine pistol.

“And that creates an opening. It makes them easy to find.”

“Ugh!?” quietly groaned a 21st infantryman who had made the mistake of checking the time on his watch, which had a cover but still used glow-in-the-dark paint.

The woman from the hellish Special Training Unit snuck up behind him, but she could not shoot him since a muzzle flash would cause the Crystal Scrying to immediately fire on them. Instead, she covered the victim’s mouth from behind and pressed a pen-like pneumatic injector full of a sleeping drug against the side of his neck.

She did not need to worry about sterilization or disinfection with an enemy soldier. Or perhaps she was the type who felt more hostility toward embarrassments on her own side than toward foreign enemies.

“You two grab his arms and legs and carry him somewhere else since that tiltrotor is flying around unpredictably. Hmm, this is about the Body File, so this is bound to be a long talk. We might also want to use that mobile device, so I hope we can find a glacier cave or something.”

“Wait, why do you instructors get the good stuff? No fair! We don’t get to use sleeping drugs!”

“This is for emergency use to help out the children who have trouble sleeping in the cold. Do not underestimate the mountain nights. I can adjust my own internal clock, so I do not need it.”

Quenser and the others lugged the 21st soldier into a cave made entirely of ice. It may have been a tourist attraction during normal times.

“Let’s start with a standard check of his belongings.”

His radio and mobile device were a must. Paper maps were a valuable source of information, so you always wanted to check what was hand-marked on those.

They did not find the Body File as any sort of paper document.

Of course, that was expected when the 21st wanted to keep it hidden.

The hands on the poor victim’s watch were pointed up.

The hour hand, the minute hand, and the second hand were all pointed directly to the top, so...

"Tah dah. Happy New Year," whispered Quenser.

"For some reason, I don't feel like celebrating," groaned Heivia next to him.

They did not feel like anything had changed and dawn felt a long way off. The heavy darkness would be with them for a while longer.

Elise turned back toward them.

"Oh, can you two head further into the cave?"

"Why? I don't want to walk around needlessly and fall into a crevasse."

"This boy here is about to wake up and on-site interrogations are always a dangerous endeavor. I have performed a body search, but you don't want to be around if he removes the pin of a grenade he has hidden somewhere, do you?"

Teachers apparently knew very well how to make naughty boys' balls shrivel up.

The two idiots could only obey after hearing that. The busty blonde glasses woman waited until they were out of sight before getting to work.

"Now, then."

After tying the enemy soldiers' hands behind his back, she lightly tapped on his back. The 21st infantryman groaned and woke up.

She circled to his front side, crouched down, and spoke from close range.

Yes, she intentionally invaded his personal space to make this a form of close-quarters combat.

"Good morning."

"!?"

"I don't have to tell you what battalion we belong to, do I? You're the ones that attacked us, after all. But hogging all the information to yourself is hardly fair. It makes you look the bad guys here. Sharing is caring, right?"

"I-I won't talk."

"The Body File."

"Eek!!"

His rejection was a little too obvious.

They were clearly up to no good here, but based on that reaction, their decision must not have been based on a careful cost-benefit analysis. This seemed more like the Faith Organization. The 21st seemed to fear even hearing other people speak that name.

"Can't you tell us? Surely we have the right to know what it is we're being killed over."

"You...you must be joking!! Listen, our Second Generation Crystal Scrying outside can see anything and everything. If you release me now, your good deed will not go unrewarded!!"

"Oh, it can see anything and everything, can it?"

She gave him a tormenting look.

That strongest teacher finally allowed a cruel look on her face.

"By the way, we are currently so deep inside a glacier cave that none of our lights will be visible from outside. You know what that means, don't you? You bothered to bring flares with you, so you can't tell me you don't know how important light is here."

"Wai-"

Two gunshots rang out. It did not matter that he had his hands bound behind his back and could not resist. She shot straight through both his shins. While it was a handgun, it was a .45 caliber, so the bones had undoubtedly shattered.

His scream was louder than the gunshots.

"Your shins can be repaired since they are such simple bones, so I hope you can see my good will and friendship in not shooting out your knees instead."

"K-kahh!? Aghahhh!!"

"On the other hand, you can never descend the mountain on your own like this, can you? You have only one option left: waiting for someone to rescue you. But do you really think anyone will notice you are here if we leave you in this cave?"

His breathing grew erratic.

His eyeballs rolled around in his head.

“I...I...won’t talk. No matter what...you do to me!! This is a sign of my loyalty. I should count myself lucky I can demonstrate it in such a concrete way! Yes, this is all for the glory of the royals!!”

“Concrete? Concrete, you say? Are you sure you aren’t clinging to a formless fantasy in the face of a very real death? But don’t worry. That does not make you a bad person. Now, are you thinking I have to keep you alive as long as I need that secret from you?”

Elise smiled, pointed deeper into the glacier cave, and spoke.

Spoke cruelly.

“By the way, I happen to have another of your soldiers lying back there. I know it is cliché, but let’s go with this: whoever talks first gets to live. The Alps are a dangerous place in the winter. Whoever gets left behind is sure to freeze solid without even getting to rot.”

That was of course a bluff, but the soldier had no way of knowing that. He was in so much pain his vision was fading, he was terrified of the death fast approaching him, he felt overwhelmingly alone knowing his allies would never realize he was here, and the world around him seemed entirely under the control of this incomprehensible sadist. All of those facts helped make the nonexistent illusion of a fellow prisoner back there seem so very real.

“I want to know everything you know: about the royals you mentioned, about the Body File, and everything else. I will do whatever it takes to get it out of you. You sent an Object after us, so surely you understand that being a fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldier isn’t going to save you here.”

He believed she would do it.

Yes, he had been unconscious, so he did not know she had asked Quenser and Heivia to wait back there. He only knew he could sense someone stirring after the ominous gunfire and screaming. And when someone was afraid, they could mistake some pampas grass for a ghost if their thoughts had been primed correctly.

That nonexistent doubt would blossom into so much more, just like a microscopic piece of dust forming the core of a snow crystal.

“Now.”

Elise Montana of the 7th Special Training Unit spoke as slowly and gently as a hypnotist.

After sealing off all paths of escape, her bewitching voice could bend people to her will.

“Now.”

Two more loud gunshots rang out.

And finally...

“You can come out now.”

The two idiots nervously did so.

“H-hey. What happened? It reeks of gunpowder smoke in here. And what happened to that enemy soldier?”

“I got him to tell me most of what we wanted to know about the Body File, so I sent him back home.”

“Really?”

“We can’t lug a hostage around with us, can we? We have what we wanted to know, so letting him go is best. More importantly, I learned something about the Crystal Scrying, so I will share that with you.”

“Okay, if you say so,” said Quenser and Heivia as they hesitantly approached her.

“Also, there is a fairly deep crevasse over there,” she added with a smile. “It’s a little hard to see, so make sure you don’t fall in□”

Part 9

Pleading for the higher ups to end this clash between the 37th and the 21st would be useless because the 37th would be wiped out before the home country completed their plodding investigation.

That was why Frolaytia had narrowed her focus down to Bullrank Happy-Youth, commander of the 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

She did not know what the higher ups were doing, but she could end the battle if she found some compromising personal secret she could use against him.

Bullrank's analog and digital personal information had been modified to make him look like a painfully average person. However, his social media records had been rewritten without the civilian corporations noticing. If they were told they had fallen victim to a cyber attack and needed to investigate some deleted or modified data, they were sure to notice the unnatural changes to Bullrank Happy-Youth's history.

Someone was sure to try to stop that.

He might have a great many friends in the government offices, but they might not all be as strictly protected as Bullrank himself.

The more helpers he had, the more chances they had to find a lead.

However...

"It's no use. The 37th's server just went down. All the datalinks have been severed, so we're entirely isolated!"

"That was fast."

Frolaytia clicked her tongue at the shouted report from one of the geeks in the electronic simulation division.

It had only been a few minutes since they sent the warning email to the SNS corporation. The corporation was not about to trust very single email they received from a public agency. Targeted attacks spoofing such official notifications were common these days, so they were sure to check to make sure it was legit first. If they received no response while checking, they were sure to determine it to be fraudulent.

For that matter, any external suggestion to rethink your server maintenance posed a considerable risk from an internet security standpoint. Just like with people claiming they can tell you how to get a refund at an ATM, changing your settings based on the instructions from some sincere-sounding voice on the phone was liable to leave you with a hole in your thick firewall.

However, Frolaytia Capistrano had figured some things out by now.

(I see.)

The geek had grown very nervous very fast with the internet down.

"Wh-wh-wh-what do we do now? Is that mobile device Quenser's group stole our last hope? It's supposed to have some files related to the Body File, right?"

“Those are additional documents explaining what to do with the data and not the Body File itself, right? Then they aren’t enough. In fact, does it even exist in an accessible form? Bullrank may simply have it memorized.”

“Then there’s nothing we can do.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Frolaytia grinned at the electronic simulation division’s words. “They may look untouchable, but they have already made a major mistake. Do you know what that is?”

“?”

“Listen, whatever my personal opinion of you is, I trust in how obsessive you are about your job. I know you will never betray your own work. So I have a task for you, but don’t let anyone else know, okay?”

Part 10

The Legitimacy Kingdom’s 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion supported the Second Generation Crystal Scrying.

Quenser’s group held a strategy meeting in that glacier cave while eating flavorless soap-like rations.

Elise was the first to speak.

“Crystal Scrying apparently refers to crystal ball divination.”

“Hey, does the origin of the name really matter? Don’t you have some more, y’know, technological information?”

“My, my. Knowing the enemy’s beliefs and tastes is very useful in predicting their actions. To continue, the 21st is attacking the 37th over that Immortanoid business. You know, the largescale ‘deposit’ you happened across in the Uyuni Salt Flat.”

They were using their lights since they were in the cave, but that was enough for fear to clutch at their hearts. They knew the light could not get outside, but it still felt like they were marking themselves for death.

“Our busy commander left that out of her report, didn’t she?” Heivia grimaced at the flavorless food. “The fact that word still got out makes it something of an open secret, doesn’t it?”

“The less accurate the information, the more people expect from a treasure map,” said Quenser. “So

does the 21st want to dig up that Immortanoid that can't be found in the natural world? Or do they want to hide the Immortanoid they deposited in that secret bank?"

"Neither." Elise shook her head. "The 21st isn't interested in either of those things."

"Huh? That doesn't make any sense! There are only two options here! There's a ton of valuable rare earth hidden in front of them, so they must either want it or want to keep it hidden. Or are you saying they attacked us for something entirely unrelated to that treasure map!?"

"It would be best to say their circumstances here are unique to the Legitimacy Kingdom. It's about land." The blonde glasses woman shrugged her shoulders that had to be stiff due to her large chest. "I mean, that's what the Legitimacy Kingdom's royals and nobles are all about, right? A king with lots of land orders the nobles that serve him to manage different parts of that land. The Legitimacy Kingdom is the world power that formed by gathering together as many of those monarchs as possible. They openly place a lot of weight on bloodline and history, but they must place just as much weight on territory."

"Well, yeah. My Winchell family has land all over the place, including a vineyard and a lunar villa. But isn't that basically a special bonus you get for having the high-level bloodline of a noble or royal?"

"No." Elise Montana laughed as she rejected that idea. "Quite the opposite in fact."

"The opposite?" asked Commoner Quenser with a frown.

The blonde glasses woman sighed and looked to Heivia for some reason. She seemed to be reacting to her last shred of a conscience, just like someone who could not bring themselves to kick an elderly person in the back.

"The Legitimacy Kingdom wanted land first and foremost," she said. "Because with land comes opportunity."

"Opportunity?"

"The obvious example is for making money, such as building a town, establishing trade routes, or mining underground resources, but those might as well be bonus prizes. What the royals wanted most of all was the opportunity comes in the form of medicinal herbs or minerals."

"Herbs?"

That word sounded out of place here.

That was not something that could be sold for plenty of money like gold or Immortanoid.

It could instead be made into medicines.

“Am I wrong?” She gave a gentle smile. “If we set aside the historical background of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s honorable royals and nobles, then they are set apart from the commoners by the rare and special blood in their veins, right?”

“Y-yeah, but what of it?” awkwardly asked Heivia.

Was he being considerate of the commoner seated next to him, or did he have a bad feeling some fundamental belief of his was about to crumble away?

Elise did not stop regardless.

“But what does that mean from a genetic standpoint? If the commoners have the more standard and generic genetic information, then the nobles and royals have the more irregular and unique genetic information. But is that really better?”

“Ah.”

“Genetics determine how susceptible you are to certain diseases and how resistant you are to environmental changes. The thing is, the more standard commoner genes have had more of a chance to mix all of that stuff together, so wouldn’t they have the greater resistance to different things?”

“W-wait. Hold on!! You could say the same about the nobles with more unique genes. Even if some virulent infectious disease is causing normal people to drop like flies, the unique part of our genes might let us survive!!”

“Yes, if you look at the nobles as a whole.”

“What do you mean as a whole?”

“Let’s say you have 26 different noble bloodlines, A through Z. The only one to survive the immediate threat would be the one with the X genes, so most of the nobles would be wiped out. That really does not seem like an efficient way to survive as a group.”

It all came back to this.

This was why the nobles and royals wanted so much land and it was why they accepted other monarchs from countries with entirely different histories and cultures.

“So are you saying the top level of the Legitimacy Kingdom is working together to conquer that weakness and fragility in their blood? And that’s why they want medicinal herbs and minerals?”

“Thinking of it as strong and weak is inaccurate. It may be better to think of it in terms of being generic enough to survive as many different threats as possible. Now, it seems the Body File is a list of all reported hereditary vulnerabilities in the different noble and royal bloodlines.”

It was understandable that they would not want that getting out.

First of all, the nobles and royals were a minority when compared to the commoners. And since the Legitimacy Kingdom ruled itself by having a minority of superior people guiding the general masses, they could not possibly let their weaknesses show.

Those kings and knights could not accept a situation where the majority assisted a weak few.

Also, the commoners would be incensed if they learned of that weakness. They would question why they had to fight wars and bloody themselves to protect those people’s land...and sometimes steal other people’s land for them. Those medicinal herbs and minerals meant nothing to the commoners, so why should they work so hard for some new medicine that would not benefit them in any way?

“They cannot let this get out.” Elise Montana described the cause of death currently stalking them. “So the Legitimacy Kingdom covered up the truth with a different form of bait. They invented the idea that ruling all that land would give them plenty of underground resources such as gold and rare earths.”

“Then the artificial Immortanoid was caught up in all this by pure chance?”

“I do not know. More money is one way of achieving greater medical technology, so my guess is the Legitimacy Kingdom wanted to be as rich as possible. In that sense, they might prefer if the world economy is run on a simpler system based entirely on underground resources like gold.”

“You’ve gotta dumb down this talk of economics for me.”

“Sure, sure. For example, the current economy runs on currencies like the dollar and euro, right? There are other items you can use, of course, like virtual currencies and jewels.”

“Well, yeah.”

“But currency started out as gold and silver coins, right? And paper bills were originally a ticket you could exchange for a set amount of gold because the gold coins were too heavy to carry around. A system like that, where everything is a stand-in for gold, is known as the gold standard.”

“So while the Legitimacy Kingdom was working to break into a dollar-ruled world with the euro, they decided it would be easier to bring back the gold-focused gold standard system since their control of the land gives them control of the gold too?”

Reviving an older system was exactly the kind of thing the Legitimacy Kingdom liked to do. The royals and nobles would see it as a worthwhile cause since they were so desperate to reclaim their authority.

“Come to think of it, we do tend to make new money at the drop of a hat, like with those commemorative gold Christmas coins and gold New Year’s coins.”

“That would be the ideal for them. But at the moment, they have not managed to make any headway outside of the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

Quenser and Elise were discussing the matter in a friendly manner, but then Heivia quickly interrupted.

“B-but what does that have to do with Immortanoid? How was any of that a problem???”

“Because if they make dollars and euros into tickets that can be exchanged for gold, they are ultimately making it all subservient to the enormous framework known as the gold business. And that gives the Legitimacy Kingdom a huge advantage since their obsession with land gives them control of so much of the underground resources. But what if Immortanoid takes over instead? That is an artificial element created in a particle accelerator, not something buried in the ground. If dollars become tickets that can be exchanged for Immortanoid, then all the dollars in circulation around the world will essentially be owned by whatever world power controls that.”

“Hmm, so you’re saying boobs are justice???”

“I am saying all their hard work to bring back the gold standard system would be for nothing! They want to keep the Capitalist Corporations from taking the lead role in the world economy using their experiments in creating artificial elements with particle accelerators!! Explanation complete!!”

This topic was better suited for the money-obsessed Capitalist Corporations. Quenser did not understand a lot of it (even though he wanted to become richer than the nobles), but he could kind of see how the Legitimacy Kingdom would be harmed by that turn of events.

But anyway...

“The Legitimacy Kingdom nobles and royals believe in the superiority of their bloodlines, but they see the inherent inferiority as well. They know there is a genetic risk of them dying from a disease or disaster that normal people can survive. Or perhaps it would be best to say they believe there is one. So they have been researching their genetic information in secret while also buying up land around

the world to efficiently acquire the medicinal herbs and minerals needed to create various medicines.”

No one knew which genes would actually come in handy.

If everyone had the same optimal genes, then the entire species could be annihilated by a single disease.

Being a minority could be seen as a plus or a minus depending on how you looked at it.

In that sense, the royals and nobles needed to trust in the value of their privileged class to the very end. They had to believe the very propaganda they spread. Because once they started to suspect there might be a downside to being a minority, it would gradually cloud their hearts.

They would go from being a powerful minority to a weak one.

“That is the identity of the conspiracy surrounding the Body File. Major Capistrano had the opportunity to secretly discover this while dealing with that land-based underground bank both in the Bering Sea and in the Uyuni Salt Flat...or so the 21st and their higher ups concluded. She would have seen unnatural land that was bought in an unnatural way and, if she investigated that, it could have revealed the secret behind the acquisition of that land.”

So they had decided to eliminate her.

Those powerful people were willing to kill others in the Legitimacy Kingdom over this.

The Legitimacy Kingdom believed that the noble bloodlines would guide the people.

But the truth was very different. Those “noble bloodlines” were nothing more than filthy landowners who were so terrified of genetic vulnerabilities (which might not even exist) that they clung to unproven medicinal properties and healing methods.

For example, the longevity mineral known as Immortanoid.

That miracle rock was said to activate the cells with its faint radiation and add a 30% extension onto the lifespan set at either end of the chromosomes.

A commoner like Quenser found that idea to be absurd and it seemed a lot more likely someone was using disinformation to intentionally inflate the price of that artificial element. But he had also heard that it was highly popular with the rich people led astray by those rumors.

And if that was enough to fool them, they must have had a desire strong enough to let themselves be fooled.

Something had made them desperate for anything that ensured their health.

“...”

Heivia Winchell remained silent for a while.

No, he may not have had anything to say.

After fighting enough money-driven wars, it became all too obvious how phony the causes advocated by the world powers really were. But that did not mean he could so easily throw out the time he had spent growing up as a noble.

There had even been times when that power had shown its usefulness.

For example, when he had rescued those children on the aurora observation ship.

So what if he was told it was all a lie?

“For now, let us set aside whether or not their claim is accurate.”

Elise Montana remained calm.

Since the 21st and the 37th were both from the Legitimacy Kingdom and she was from the 7th Special Training Unit, she could have taken either side, but she was saying she would stick with Quenser and Heivia.

“The problem is that the 21st fully believes it and has decided the 37th is an enemy of the Legitimacy Kingdom as a whole for trying to hide the Immortanoid found at the Uyuni Salt Flat. Words will not be enough to stop them. We have no hope for tomorrow unless we kill them and drive them to the point of utter annihilation.”

She took control of the conversation before Quenser or Heivia could.

“The 21st’s Object is the Crystal Scrying.”

However.

Therefore.

“Like I said, it is named after crystal ball divination. The name imagines the Object as a giant glass ball and a fortuneteller. But why is it known as that? Because the primary material used to construct that Object is glass.”

“Gl-...?”

A glass Object.

Battlefield Student Quenser craved bizarre forms of inspiration, but even he could not keep up with that idea.

“Standard Objects are made by taking steel armor panels mixed with a heat-resistant reactive material and layering them like leaf springs, but this one is made by taking reinforced glass and protective film and layering them like a baumkuchen. We had a vague idea of that in advance thanks to our intelligence collection. There was still some data in the military servers, after all. But this battle has shown us that the glass fixation is seen in the weapons as well. It sends messages to the railgun shells through fiber optic cables and those are made from glass, right?”

Knowing the enemy’s beliefs and tastes was very useful in predicting their actions.

This did follow from the 21st’s dislike of artificial elements.

“With the exception of some special acids, glass is extremely resistant to nearly all chemicals – that is, to the artificial elements and compounds they so despise. Plus, it does not stimulate people’s greed with its rarity the way gold does. From their meager perspective, it is the perfect Object for extracting the poison and changing the world in a pure and proper way. I initially wondered why they would make it from glass of all things, but that must have been the idea behind it.”

They saw themselves as the ones removing poison from the world.

In that case, they would see Quenser’s group as a toxin needing elimination now that they knew what was in the Body File.

If they were that obsessed, they likely used glass in a lot of places beyond the armor and main cannon trajectory control. For example, the capacitors supporting the incredible power requirements of the container railgun main cannons may have used Leyden jars and the image processing may have used an image intensifier.

On the other hand, it seemed unlikely that the Crystal Scrying used no non-glass substances. In other words, that it did not use any rare earths. Even if it did use thin film integrated circuits made from glass, that was not enough to perform data processing. The semiconductors would be made of

silicon, aka glass, but other metals would be needed too.

Were they okay with using anything as long as it was not an artificial element made in a particle accelerator?

Plus, these were haughty nobles. It would hardly be surprising to find they gave themselves exemptions to the rules they insisted everyone else follow.

However...

"The enemy's armor doesn't use the usual temperature-resistant reactive material," said Quenser. "It uses special glass armor made by layering reinforced glass and film like an onion. In that case..."

"Hey, you aren't thinking the firepower we have on hand is enough to deal with that, are you?" said Heivia. "We don't have any tanks or armored vehicles that can still run out there. Even the Princess is having a hard time of it, so we can't just stand out in front of the thing!!"

"I never said we would be doing that. We aren't going to blast all the way through the Crystal Scrying. But if we could roast the surface a little..."

"Yesss?" prompted Elise in an odd way.

"Its armor is definitely tough." Quenser sighed. "Since it's been made into Object armor, our fists couldn't break it even if it was originally glass. It must already be too strong for that."

Simply putting it to words seemed to be medically wearing down his body's strength, but he kept going.

If he stopped thinking, he would lose sight of their only escape route.

"But what if we remade it into something else entirely?"

He said it all in one breath.

Their comeback started now.

"Glass can be processed into many different forms. Glass fiber, foam glass, insulators, etc. If it can be melted with heat, then it can be changed by mixing in an impurity before it rehardens, right?"

"And that would make it more brittle?"

“Not necessarily, but we might be able to pull off something neat.” Quenser spelled out his thoughts. “I don’t know if it’s in panels or blocks, but that Object is formed entirely out of combined pieces of glass, right? If we break down that form, it shouldn’t be able to move the way it was designed to. Take the joints for example. If we distort those, we can lock up its movements.”

“But where do we get that impurity?” asked Elise. “Hiking back down to the maintenance base at the foot of the mountain and bringing back a ton of some kind of chemical substance does not sound realistic to me.”

“Foam glass doesn’t require any other materials. Snow is being blasted into the air all over the place, right? As long as we melt the surface of the glass, snow will get into it without us having to do a thing. And I mean a lot of snow. The snow will melt and the water will evaporate, but the holes will remain. So as the below-freezing air causes it to cool and harden, the glass will become a fluffy and spongy material. If the apparent volume changes and it expands enough, the joints won’t be able to move.”

Of course, that would not be enough to defeat the 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion’s Second Generation.

That would only slow it down.

“Heivia, do you have a missile?”

“Kh.”

“Heivia. It’ll be okay. I’m not saying we have to defeat that Object ourselves. We can pass the baton to the Princess and she’ll save us. But you’re still scared?”

“Why the hell wouldn’t I be?”

“Let’s end this before sunrise. We can’t let this problem linger for too long.”

They had a plan.

Quenser, Heivia, and Elise ended their last supper and walked to the exit of the glacier cave with their respective equipment.

Even now, the cave was shaking from a low tremor. They had not thought about it until now, but that sturdy cave could have collapsed at any time. That just drove home the point that there were no safe zones on the battlefield.

As they approached the exit, Quenser switched off his light.

If any oddity was noticed or even the slightest light was detected, those extraordinary shells would be flying their way. The time had come to stick their tongue out behind the grim reaper's back while hoping like hell they were not noticed.

"I'm not going to defeat it." While carrying the missile launcher over his shoulder, Heivia repeated that under his breath like some kind of incantation to ward off evil. "I'm relying on the Princess. I'm just letting the Princess win this for us. This is still a standard Object vs. Object battle. I'm sticking with the normal rules. So it'll be okay. I can survive this. I just have to let the Princess finish it for us."

Yes.

They only had to pass the baton to the Princess.

They only needed the Princess's help.

When they stepped out of the glacier cave, the very first thing they saw was the Baby Magnum being pierced through by a giant railgun shell.

The deafening boom and shockwave arrived after a short delay and all the snow on the slope crashed down in an avalanche.

Something was launched diagonally back from the Baby Magnum's pierced spherical main body. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but that was probably a person rather than a flare dangling from a parachute in the cold sky. That was the Princess.

The Baby Magnum was at a higher point on Mont Blanc while it dirtied the night sky with black smoke. That might not seem like anything unusual, but it was. The Crystal Scrying was designed for use in mountainous terrain, but the Baby Magnum did not have the mountain-climbing capability needed to scale the highest peak in the Alps. It could not climb the steep slope past a point, so the jagged mountain peak was a dead end for the Princess.

Meanwhile, the Crystal Scrying could move as it pleased and had circled around toward the base. It had moved rapidly in every direction, adjusted its position, and fired its octuple railguns from the optimum angle. It had controlled the tail fins with fiber optic cables so those shells gathered around the Baby Magnum from a variety of angles.

This was the result.

After being driven up the mountain, the Princess had not had anywhere to escape.

"You have got to be kidding me."

Heivia dropped the shoulder-fired missile launcher tube he had been preparing to fire.

They could no longer rely on her.

They had no Object. It was just those puny foot soldiers.

And the battle was not over.

The delinquent noble's voice trembled.

"What the hell are we supposed to do now, goddammit!!!???"

Part 11

The Baby Magnum had been destroyed.

It may not have been completely destroyed since the reactor had not exploded, but it could no longer move now that the Princess had decided to eject. Heading there and repairing the Object on the scene was not realistic.

"This is why I didn't like the idea." Heivia's tears froze as he curled up on the spot and held his head in his hands. "Fuck off with all of this!! Why should I care about this genetic vulnerability and Body File stuff!? I tried. I did what I could, didn't I!? No one could possibly complain if I turned back and curled up in that cave until all this is over!!"

"Heivia."

"Kh."

The awful friend turned toward Quenser with wavering pupils.

And he raised his voice.

"Besides, what do I even gain if we win here? If the Body File goes public, the entire concept of nobles might go away!! The commoners who believed we were so healthy and strong aren't going to take it!! They'll drag us down from our position of privilege!! Is that really something I should risk my life to fight for!?"

"Then are you saying the 21st is in the right here? Are you really willing to say that, Heivia?"

"You're a commoner, so you don't understand the hardships of a noble life!!"

"Whether or not we commoners respect you is supposed to be based on your actions! All this talk about beautiful genetic sequences sounds like something the Information Alliance would be into!! I can tell you one thing for damn sure: no one's following the kind of people who cover up the truth and get all snippy the instant their position is threatened!!"

"~ ~ ~!!"

"Who cares about history!? Why should we give a crap about tradition!? If you're worried about that stuff, Heivia, then you'll have to build it up yourself!! By becoming someone everyone can respect!!"

"Oh, shut up!! It isn't that easy!!!!!"

"You can head back into the cave if you like," bluntly cut in Elise. She was in her strict instructor mode. "Based on the training menu, you were only issued three days' worth of food. We have no idea at all how long they will remain in Mont Blanc, so there is a good chance you will end up fighting starvation."

"Elise, do you have an idea?"

"Not really. But the Crystal Scrying should be relieved after defeating its enemy Object. It will have relaxed now that the only real threat has been eliminated. Once they calm down, they will close in on us, so now is the time to act if we hope to shake them. This is our last chance."

"Last chance, my ass." Heivia shoved aside all other opinions with the voice of someone having a nightmare. "We never had a chance!! Our busty commander set us up, threw us into a battle we never agreed to, and now we're paying the price! Actually, it's worse than that. What good is winning even? We've already stepped on the landmine. We took the wrong path from the very beginning. There's no route to the destination from here!! Continuing on will only get us stranded until we die!!"

"Let's leave him behind," said Elise Montana after no longer than a second.

Heivia looked shocked, but she tilted her head.

"Oh? You can throw a tantrum and desert if you like, but who said we would follow you? We need to use this chance to fight, and even if we just want to run away, we should try to escape the troops surrounding us before they close in too far. At the very least, holing up the cave will not get us anywhere. The most we could do there is eat up all our soap-like rations, lick the glacier walls, and grow skinnier and skinnier with nowhere to go. I would prefer not to die while wondering if I should start running my own urine through a filter."

"Elise."

“And if we do end up defeating the Crystal Scrying, you will have no place there. In that case, you will be court martialed, found guilty, and thrown into a military prison.”

Quenser tried to stop her, but she did not listen.

Elise Montana was the perfect strict military instructor, but she got a perfect 0 as an infirmary counselor.

“Thank you for your work thus far, Heivia, but your life ends here. Whether we win or lose against the Crystal Scrying, you have run into a dead end. The path forked to the left and right, yet you chose to plow right on through into the bushes for no good reason. But this is your life, so I will not stop you. Quenser, the two of us can rejoice in life together.”

“Hold on, Eli- ouch!? Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!?”

Elise had only grabbed Quenser’s hand and lightly twisted it, but what did it look like to Heivia left behind in the cave entrance?

His last two companions had walked off together and vanished beyond the snow.

“Wait.”

It started as a whisper, but it finally grew to a loud shout.

“Wait!! Okay! Okay, I get it! Please don’t leave me here!!”

The glasses woman stuck her tongue out where Heivia could not see.

Now, she had given him some motivation, but she had done nothing to improve their circumstances here. If they did not come up with their next move soon, they could only wait for the 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion to arrive and kill them.

“So is that armor really made of reinforced glass?” asked Elise. “They really altered its properties by adjusting the pressure while it formed?”

“Given how they think, I can’t imagine they would have made it sturdier by mixing impurities in,” said Quenser.

“Right? I just hope it isn’t borosiliclit glass.”

“Elise, do you mean borosilicate glass?”

“Hm? That’s what I said: borosiliclit glass.”

Quenser celebrated in his heart at managing to secretly record it on his mobile device this time (even though a single light source meant death). That might seem entirely pointless, but idiots like him were the type who would grab a highlighter whenever they spotted a dirty word in the dictionary. There was no real reason. It merely satisfied his collector’s spirit.

Elise only tilted her head because she had not noticed what she said.

“What should we do? If we need a weapon, we could probably find a tank or armored vehicle if we dug into the snow.”

“Can you use a cannon, Elise?”

“If it is one meant for use by a single person. If it needs multiple people, I might just have to give that spoiled noble boy a spanking.”

“...”

Quenser thought for a short moment.

“The enemy’s armor is made of glass. Glass is an insulator, so how is it sending power from the central reactor to the main cannon railguns?”

“?”

He quickly reached a decision.

“Elise, search out a gun of 90mm or bigger. It can be a maneuver combat vehicle or a mortar for all I care!!”

“In that case, I see an adorable silhouette over there.”

Elise pointed at an odd vehicle half buried in snow.

It looked like a bulky snowmobile with armor panels and continuous tracks, but there was a large indentation on the back and it had no roof. Instead, a thick barrel aimed diagonally up toward the night sky behind it.

“This is an open-top mortar carrier. It carries a powerful 120mm mortar but it has stripped away all the unnecessary exterior and was slimmed down with ultra-thin armor, so it weighs less than 10 tons

and can be carried anywhere by helicopter or ship. It can follow the common troops around like a puppy.”

“No one wants a puppy here. A normal machinegun could pierce that armor, so it might as well be an aluminum can. Whoever gets stuck using it clearly got the short end of the stick!!”

Also, it had an open top, so had they been driving it around the Mont Blanc night while exposed to the cold air? They could only pray the crew had not been frozen solid by vaporization heat.

Also, an Object could blast through a warship or a nuclear shelter in a single blast, so death was assured either way. But Quenser’s group only needed to get one shot in, so the thickness of the armor was irrelevant.

After brushing off the snow and exposing most of the gun, Elise inspected different parts of the giant mortar that extended back like a fishing rod.

“It appears to still have a round inside. How dangerous. ...So, Quenser, what should I aim at?”

“Hold on a sec,” cut in Heivia. “What good is firing that thing? The bright muzzle flash and loud blast will gather everyone’s attention on us!”

“Chickens deserve to be plucked of their feathers and soaked in an ice bath. Now, what are my specific instructions?”

“I’m not taking Heivia’s side here, but screwing this up really is the end for us. I appreciate your help, but you’re free to run away as long as you teach me how to fire it first.”

“That is not something that can be learned overnight. Not at this adorable thing’s size.” Elise smiled bitterly. “Also, I have no other ideas either, so I will bet on whatever has even a slight possibility of working. I am doing this of my own free will, so do not worry.”

Hearing that was all Quenser needed to complete his preparations.

That left just one more person.

“Hey, Heivia.”

“What?”

“A commoner like me has no way of knowing how fragile and precarious a position the nobles and royals are in. That foundation has been there from the moment you were born, so it might feel like

your very soul has been shaken.”

Saying that may have qualified as disrespectful, but they had no idea how long that entire hierarchy would still be around.

However.

“But you know what? I don’t think it was meaningless.”

“?”

“I mean, you saved those kids on the aurora observation ship. They saw you as the knight who brought Santa to them. It might sound like something from a picture book and it might sound unrealistic, but that was Heivia the Noble standing there in that moment. A commoner like me couldn’t have saved those kids’ souls too.”

“That’s a bunch of idealistic hogwash. It doesn’t change the reality if the situation.”

“Maybe not, but no matter what the Body File says, there are people out there who can be saved by clinging to those dreams. ...So you can’t let that power be stolen from you here. Nobles are supposed to be dignified, right? Royals are supposed to be respected, right? But that has nothing to do with a sequence of AGCT!! We commoners are looking for the kind of people you see in picture books! The kind of people who always stay strong and who will stand up for anyone in need or in tears!! Are you kidding me right now? What happened to chivalry, what happened to ladies first, what happened to mercy and charity, what happened to noblesse oblige!? Don’t hand your justice over to the people killing their own out of fear of losing their power! Heivia!! Aren’t you one of the nobles who were born to protect the people from those very cruelties!?”

Heivia Winchell hung his head for a while.

He could not find anything to say.

But eventually, he found something.

It was quiet at first.

“Shut up.”

But he spoke.

He finally spoke his mind.

“Do you think I didn’t know how pathetic, ugly, and hopelessly small a person I am!? How could I not be terrified!? How could I not be shaken when something I’ve believed in all my life is being written off as a lie!?”

Quenser said nothing.

Elise started to act in her utilitarian nature, but he stopped her with a hand.

He had to stop her.

“And I know it isn’t right!! I know if I hide from the truth there’s no coming back from it. I want to hold my head high! I want to look ahead to the future as I live my life!! So I can’t accept what the 21st is doing! I never asked for their help. They bloodied their hands all on their own, so like hell I’m going to agree if they ask all of us nobles to share the responsibility there!! You can go straight to hell on your own, you assholes!! Yeah, yeah! That’s right!! Are you saying the Winchell family isn’t good enough the way it is and you commoners won’t accept us right now!?”

Then.

Then.

Then.

“I just have to do it myself!! I’ll be the good kind of noble! I’ll make the Winchell family something worth honoring! And that’s something I can never do by covering up the truth and going around killing innocent people like these pieces of garbage!!!!!!”

Quenser Barbotage was a commoner.

That had been set in stone from the moment he was born, so he could never become a noble or royal. That meant defending them would never benefit him in any way.

But he still smiled.

“That’s more like it.”

He thought of the children on the aurora observation ship.

Once Heivia had decided he would never do anything that would disappoint those children, he had proven he had a truly noble soul.

What did genetics matter? Why should anyone care if someone has a beautiful sequence of DNA? No one was out there writing haikus with AGCT sequences.

“Okay, I’m ready to do this!! The Legitimacy Kingdom might go down in flames, but I’ll protect the Winchell family no matter what! Because that’s what I’ve decided I’ll do!! And these assholes out here are standing in the way of that. How can we blow them up and protect the world!!!!???”

“Sounds like you’ve had an awakening,” said Elise. “But emotions will not save us here, so I would really like some concrete targeting instructions.”

They had finally reached this point, so there was no need to hesitate.

Quenser immediately gave her the answer.

“Heading: 2080. Angle: 450.”

“Umm, that’s nowhere near the Crystal Scrying.”

“Shut up,” growled Heivia like a wounded animal. He was picking up a heavy shell and shoving it into the muzzle. “Listen, Quenser, I don’t know what’s going on in that head of yours, but promise me one thing. If we do as you say and fire this thing, can I avoid having to turn my back on those kids!? I need to remain a noble no matter what might happen!!”

“Yes.”

Quenser Barbotage knew what they had to do, so he accepted everything his awful friend left with him and raised his voice.

“So fire! Immediately!!”

The entire vehicle was struck by the powerful recoil and the 120mm shell tore through the air.

The flash of light and boom were just like a nearby lightning strike.

The attack was powerful enough to warrant that comparison.

A mortar usually launched an explosive in a large arc like a long throw in baseball to drop it on a distant enemy’s head.

But with Mont Blanc’s steep slope, it could be fired diagonally upwards to directly hit a target.

Quenser had not aimed for the Crystal Scrying.

He had aimed for the Baby Magnum where it had been cornered and destroyed up toward the peak.

More specifically, he had aimed for the slope below it.

The crumbling rock dislodged it from what it was caught on and the 50m mass slid down the steep slope. It gathered white snow and glacier ice around it as it tumbled down toward the 21st Mobile Maintenance Battalion's Second Generation!!

"Ah!!" shouted Heivia as a dull thud exploded out. "It actually goddamn hit!?"

"Get down from that thing, Elise! The enemy will have noticed this!!"

That open top provided no defensive power whatsoever and any soldiers forced to use it must have been reduced to tears, but the one advantage was how easy it was to escape. You could climb down in any direction.

The glasses woman dove down to the snow while asking a question.

"Was that a diesel ignition, or a stiletto heel?"

"What?"

"The 200,000-ton masses colliding looks fancy, but Objects are spheres. As you can tell when pressing two balls together, the surface of contact will only be a single point, so all the force will be concentrated there. Just like a nail tip or a stiletto heel, that would have considerable penetrative power. If the incredible pressure created heat, it would be even more destructive than subterranean magma!"

Ideally, that would destroy the Crystal Scrying.

But a deep cacophony of scraping metal echoed across the Mont Blanc night. It was pulling through. Even after being hit by an entire other Object, the Crystal Scrying could still move!!

"What do we do?" shouted Heivia while having trouble breathing. "Where are we supposed to run now!? If it strikes back just once, we're boned!!"

"No."

On the other hand, Quenser had a smile on his sweaty face.

His gamble had ended with hitting the enemy with the immobilized Baby Magnum.

“That won’t happen.”

The following sound of destruction was reminiscent of a large tree being split vertically.

It was a blast of electricity.

But not because there were storm clouds in the area. The sound came from the Crystal Scrying.

Specifically, from its glass armor.

“This isn’t a normal Object. That giant form is made from glass armor pasted together in onion-like layers, but that alone doesn’t let it send power from the central reactor to the main cannon railguns on the exterior.”

“Um, wouldn’t they just place metal leaf wiring in between the layers of glass like with a printed circuit board?” asked Elise. “Even normal Objects use that method.”

“Yes, and it works just fine with a normal Object.”

The sound was not stopping.

In fact, it was growing louder by the moment.

“Like I said, its armor is made from glass. The electrodes are contained between insulating glass. Do you know what structure that forms? It should come to you almost immediately if you’re enough of a hobbyist to have struggled with a soldering iron to create a self-propelled robot loaded with a deep learning AI.”

“Only you’re enough of a geek to do that, so just get to the point already!!”

“A capacitor. That’s an electronic component used to store electricity. They’re a major component of stun guns.”

It might as well have been an explosion.

This was deadly force formed from electricity.

“This wouldn’t happen if the wires remained connected to both ends, but if they end up breaking for

any reason, that thing's glass panels and metal leaf start to function as a gigantic capacitor. All the power pumped in from the reactor will build up there and have nowhere to escape."

"Then..."

"But, Heivia, you've at least heard that lithium ion batteries can explode if used improperly, right? Electricity is a form of energy, so that's not really surprising."

With a flash of light much brighter than welding, the darkness of the Mont Blanc night was swept away.

The Baby Magnum and Crystal Scrying had collided, but the 21st's colossus hopped up unnaturally. Then it lost balance. It failed to land properly, rolled onto its side, and was helpless from there.

It rolled.

The 50m giant rolled down the steep slope of Mont Blanc.

"Heh."

They did not even need to imagine what had happened to the Pilot Elite inside that Object that showed no sign of stopping.

Quenser pulled out some Hand Axe plastic explosive.

"Heivia, Elise. Prepare every weapon you have."

The Baby Magnum and the Crystal Scrying had both been incapacitated, but that would not have eliminated the grudges on both sides. They did not care that both sides were from the Legitimacy Kingdom. The White Flag signal would not reach this deep into the mountains, which was why the 21st had driven the 37th up there. And Quenser's group was not about to let the 21st get away if they said they were leaving now that they had used up all the weapons they had on hand.

From here on, they were fighting an unprotected form of war.

No more could they be baby birds begging their parent for food.

Something peeked out from Mont Blanc's summit. It was the sun. Dawn had snuck up on them at some point.

And in the instant that everything was dyed in gold, a new year had begun.

They could get a fresh start.

But in that moment, Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage had a filthy smile on his face while he made the following announcement:

“Time for the counterattack. Let’s slaughter every last one of them.”

The time had come to dye the white mountain red.

Using the blood of people who were supposed to be allies.

Part 12

“Phew,” sighed Frolaytia Capistrano.

This conference room had been full of commotion earlier, but it was empty now. She had tried her best to fight from behind the scenes, but the battle outside had ended before she could accomplish anything worthwhile.

“Major Capistrano.”

The female officer who acted like a secretary quietly called her name.

“Yes?”

The busty, silver-haired woman had her shapely butt seated on the long table instead of the chair and she did not remove the long, narrow kiseru from her mouth when she replied.

The female officer must have been accustomed to it because she did not seem to mind.

“The 21st has suffered devastating losses. They seem to be begging the higher ups to send a ceasefire command, but it is too late for that now.”

“Well, they were the ones who set things up to delay that very decision.”

“The bottleneck for us will likely be recovering the stranded Baby Magnum. It might be faster to transport the maintenance equipment up Mont Blanc to repair it on site.”

“This is all so very depressing.”

“We are almost done now, Major.”

Frolaytia viewed the smile on the female officer’s face.

And she removed the kiseru from her mouth before continuing.

“By the way, lieutenant, I have one question.”

“Yes?” asked the female officer with a polite tilt of her head.

Frolaytia Capistrano was not smiling.

“When were you planning to reveal your true colors and attack me, you 21st dog?”

The female officer drew her knife – no, her secret gun that used the knife’s grip to hide the suppressor-equipped barrel – at about the same moment Frolaytia threw her lit kiseru at the back of her hand.

“Hot!?”

“Why would you draw it right in front of me, you moron? And you were aiming for my heart? How were you supposed to pass that off as suicide?”

Without a moment’s delay, Frolaytia swept the other woman’s legs out from under her. The assassin had reflexively placed her other hand on the burn, so she failed to catch herself and slammed shoulder-first into the floor. She grimaced in pain and tried to get up, but Frolaytia pressed the bottom of her boot against the other shoulder to force her back to the floor.

She felt a dull sensation similar to operating a car’s shift lever.

That had dislocated both of the assassin’s shoulders.

“Gh, kh!?”

“Now you can’t even kill yourself. Resist any further and I will dislocate both legs as well. To be clear, a dislocated hip hurts a hell of a lot more than a shoulder. I will respect your choice, but I do not at all recommend it.”

The 21st had reacted too quickly.

The 37th's server had been cut off mere minutes after sending the warning email to the social media company in order to reveal Bullrank Happy-Youth for who he really was. The response would never be that sharp if they were simply patrolling the internet as a whole. A large company would receive hundreds of those coaxing targeted emails every single day, so not even an AI search could have responded with such accuracy.

Thus, it must have come from within the 37th.

Someone very close to Frolaytia Capistrano must have sent out a warning. She had asked a member of the electronic simulation division to investigate who was secretly sending out a signal despite the datalink being down and the server being useless. That would be who was accessing a different server to leak information.

(But I didn't expect it to be her.)

That said, not enough time had passed since the incident in the Arctic Ocean for a spy to have been sent in response to that. The 21st had not sent one of their dogs in response to anything; they had already had people everywhere.

The Princess, Quenser, and Heivia had all worked themselves to the bone for this, so Frolaytia had known she could not just wait safely for the result.

That was why she had laid this trap without knowing who would spring it, but...

(This is so very depressing.)

"We never did find any compromising information on Bullrank Happy-Youth. Except for what you might have, that is."

"!?"

This woman had covered everything up.

And the busty, silver-haired demon spoke cruelly to that person she had thought of as an ally fighting alongside her at this desk.

She spoke her words of farewell.

"I'm glad I managed to lure you out. To be honest, I would have been out of ideas if you hadn't attacked me here. Did you think I would leave you with the intelligence division? How naïve of you. I don't know where your spies are located, so this is a job for someone I know I can trust."

“You mean you will be interrogating me yourself?”

“No, I know someone even better suited for the job.” Frolaytia gave a vicious smile while shaking free of all sentimentality. “Sergeant Elise Montana. You used to be a part of the 7th Special Training Unit yourself, didn’t you? One of their strict instructors can whip you into shape. Until you tell us everything.”

Between the Lines 3

She was like a dried-out husk.

Lendy Farolito stood stock still.

“...”

“Hello?”

The ringlet curls Pilot Elite waved a small hand in the silver-haired brown-skinned commander’s face, but she remained motionless. Nothing could get her to move right now.

“Th-the underground bank for rare earths - ha, ha ha - went out of business? It went broke???”

“Oh, dear. And wait a moment. Didn’t you use tax money for that Immortanoid business?”

She had been accepting jobs where she took money from people in unstable countries and regions and converted it into precious metals like Immortanoid. The idea had been to make money off of the commissions. But if she could not convert the money as promised, she was in violation of contract.

And whatever money was lost in the process would have to be paid from her own pocket when returning it to the original owner. Along with a contract violation fee.

The introductory section of the bank’s webpage had the following written in fine print at the very bottom:

This service does not 100% guarantee profit. Be aware that there is always a risk of making back only a fraction of your principal□

“M-my Caribbean vacation.”

With their budget gone, there was nothing she could do.

So what would become of their New Year’s leave that was meant to make up for spending Christmas

