

<<EDITING (FINAL) IN PROG>>

AD-1-1 Prelude to the Celebration

Daiyan: The Elmo... still the same after all these years.

Commander: It's somewhat worse for wear compared to back then; I hope you don't mind.

Daiyan: Of course not, it's my honor to return here.

(Daiyan looks around, taking in this unfamiliar familiarity that seems to transport her back to those bygone days.)

(After leaving Griffin, the past decade felt incredibly long, but seeing me again feels like a journey back in time. The fatigue and unease from the journey gradually fade, replaced by a surge of emotions welling up in her chest.)

(Daiyan knows I have many stories to share with her, and she has many stories to tell me. Where to begin with all that's happened over the years?)

(Daiyan hesitates a bit, glancing at me tentatively. I offer a gentle smile and nod in encouragement.)

(I give her the opportunity to speak first.)

Daiyan: Commander, do you remember what happened when we first met in the Satellite City CHE-02?

Commander: I do, it was quite a thrilling experience.

Daiyan: Yes, I never imagined we'd meet again ten years later under such circumstances...

Commander: Back then, I remember you were traveling to different cities, weren't you?

Daiyan: Yes, I wanted to gain more experiences and incorporate them into my music. If you could listen to it, Commander, I'm sure you'd notice my growth.

Commander: Indeed, everyone, including myself, can feel your experiences emanating from your music, especially that piece. Especially that piece you composed in the satellite city—

Daiyan: You mean... "When the Potato Flowers Bloom"?

Commander: Yes, that piece is woven with much emotion...

Daiyan: Hmm, and so many memories...

(Even now, recalling those events still sends shivers down Daiyan's spine. She gazes out the window, her thoughts drifting back to that time...)

Daiyan: Where... where am I?

(Daiyan awakens in an unfamiliar room.)

(Her mind's racing, and she tries to run a self-diagnosis to stabilize her systems, but the numerous error messages only increase her anxiety.)

Daiyan: Did I... reboot? What is this place?

(Damage reports flood her logs, but she can't remember what happened.)

(Daiyan struggles to sit up.)

(She finds herself in a simple repair pod, with obvious signs of repairs on her body. Thankfully, all her wounds have been treated. Daiyan starts looking for her belongings, but her weapons... and even her guzheng are gone.)

(Something terrible must have happened. She has traveled to so many cities and never encountered anything like this before.)

(Everything around her is so unfamiliar, and it scares her. What worries her even more is that her companions are not by her side.)

Daiyan: Jiangyu...Zhao Hui... where are you?

(The room is empty, with only the low hum of the repair pod.)

(Daiyan tries to calm herself, ready to face whatever may happen.)

???: Don't worry about them, they're safe now.

Daiyan: Who's there?

(Daiyan follows the voice, and to her surprise, a familiar face appears before her.)

Daiyan: Springfield... Miss Springfield!

(Springfield enters the room with her familiar smile, and Daiyan finally feels a little relieved.)

Daiyan: Miss Springfield? Is it really you, from Griffin?

Springfield: Yes, it's me. You haven't forgotten me after ten years, have you?

(Even her voice is the same. No one else but Miss Springfield would speak like that.)

(Daiyan finally lets her guard down, relaxing her defensive posture. Springfield notices this and nods at her with a smile.)

Springfield: Daiyan, it's good to see you again. It's been a while. It's fortunate that I have a repair bay. It may be basic, but it should be sufficient for the task.

Daiyan: ...What happened to me?

Springfield: Your repairs were just completed, and your systems haven't fully stabilized yet. I'll fine-tune them for you later.

(While talking to Springfield, two figures suddenly dart out from behind her and rush to Daiyan.)

Jiangyu: Sis! Are you okay? You scared me to death!

Zhao Hui: Sorry, Daiyan, I couldn't stop her. You should have rested after the repairs.

Daiyan: Jiangyu, Zhao Hui, are you both alright?

Jiangyu: Of course we are! But you, Sis, you ran off on your own and then disappeared. I was so worried!

Zhao Hui: We were all worried about you. What happened?

Daiyan: ...I, I can't remember.

Springfield: It seems there's still some compatibility issue with the modules... You were attacked, but luckily the Commander saved you. Otherwise, it would have been dangerous.

Daiyan: Com... Commander?

Daiyan: Is it the same "Commander" I'm thinking of?

(Footsteps approach from outside, and Daiyan suddenly becomes nervous. She sits up quickly, smoothing her slightly messy hair.)

(Before she's ready, the figure she's been waiting for walks in.)

Commander: Springfield, how's Daiyan doing?

Daiyan: Commander, is that really you!?

Commander: Ah, are you feeling better?

Daiyan: Yes... I'm fine now, Commander.

Jiangyu: Heh~ Sis changes her whole attitude when she sees the Commander. Usually, she acts all mature~

Daiyan: Jiangyu!

Commander: Looks like you're doing fine. Springfield, how is Daiyan's condition?

Springfield: There are still some system-related issues, but I'll be done with the debugging soon.

Commander: Thank you, Springfield. 95... Daiyan now, right?

Commander: Daiyan, it's been too long. It's been... ten years?

Daiyan: Yes, ten years... I finally get to see you again...

Commander: It really has been a long time. I didn't expect to run into you in the case I'm investigating... Maybe it's fate?

Daiyan: Case?

Commander: Yes, a case. You were involved in said case and just got attacked. Do you remember what happened?

Daiyan: ...I'm trying to remember.

Springfield: The system stability module has been repaired. Daiyan, all your systems should be working properly now.

(Daiyan feels her neural cloud stabilizing, and the memories, blurred by panic, begin to return. She nods to Springfield and I, then retrieves the experience from her neural cloud.)

Commander: So, Daiyan, can you tell me what happened?

Daiyan: Yes, Commander. I remember it all. Please listen to me.

(CHE-02 Satellite City, District B3—)

(Night falls. The quiet streets bustle with activity. Workers take elevators and hang nylon ropes adorned with decorations between the streetlights. After they turn on the power, the lights come on one after another, winding into a river of light in the distance.)

(Carrying bags of varying sizes, Daiyan couldn't help but stop rushing to appreciate the alluring lights.)

Daiyan: Wow... so beautiful. This “decorative festive” scene is much more spectacular in person than in the video.

Jiangyu: Humph~ I knew you'd like it. How about it? Compared to sweeping the floor and washing dishes in a restaurant, going out shopping with me is the right choice, right?

Daiyan: Don't forget, it's Zhao Hui who took care of all the preparations for us so we could come out. We have to thank her later.

Jiangyu: I know, I know. Thank you, Zhao Hui, for your selfless sacrifice! Sis, let's go over there—!

Daiyan: Eh, hold it!

(Daiyan quickly grabs Jiangyu, who is trying to run away like a loach.)

Daiyan: Jiangyu—Have you forgotten that our primary task is to purchase supplies? Look through the list again; there's several items we haven't bought yet.

Jiangyu: These... can be bought quickly! It's still early anyway, let's wander around first... and enjoy the festive atmosphere~

Daiyan: No, we're still working. We need to finish the order and return them. Affecting the restaurant's operations won't be good.

Jiangyu: But we'll start our performance as soon as we get back. By the time we're done, there won't be anyone on the street!

Daiyan: Jiangyu... If we can't buy the missing materials back in time, it will affect the restaurant's business.

Daiyan: If the restaurant closes down, won't we lose our performance opportunity? You know how hard it is to find temporary work right now. It took us so long to find...

Jiangyu: "A restaurant willing to hire us", sis! You've said it several times!

Daiyan: Have you remembered it?

Jiangyu: Yes, yes!

Jiangyu: Ah! In the beginning, it was because you said that there was some kind of celebration in this satellite city and you wanted to come and experience it for inspiration, so we came here!

Jiangyu: But all we've been doing is working, performing, working! This is... this is... putting the cart before the horse! Yes! Putting the cart before the horse! It's so boring!

(Jiangyu lowers her head dejectedly and kicks the pebbles at her feet. The pebbles fly to the side following her force.)

(Jiangyu looks in the direction where the pebbles fly, and suddenly, she finds something interesting. She trots a few steps excitedly, completely forgetting her previous complaints.)

Jiangyu: Look, Sis! There's a weird, big guy over there! Looks a bit familiar...

Daiyan: That's... a crocodile-faced elk?! Why is there an ELID in the city?

Jiangyu: Ah? Is that what it's called? How come... The ELIDs I remember in the contamination zone weren't this tall? This one is six or seven meters tall, right?

Daiyan: Look closely, there are... ribbons on its head? Maybe it's... a prop for the celebration?

Jiangyu: Sis, why don't we go and take a look?

(Daiyan looks at the time and happens to see a new message from Zhao Hui.)

Daiyan: Maybe not. Zhao Hui just texted and said that the boss added some purchase requests. She's worried that we won't be able to carry them, so she'll come and meet us later.

Daiyan: I'll send our coordinates to Zhao Hui. We need to finish the purchase as soon as possible. It's already 6:30, and we need to be back at the restaurant by 8.

Jiangyu: Okay, okay! It's still early, no problem!

(Along the path, Daiyan and Jiangyu walk toward the giant beast standing in the clearing, which looks extremely conspicuous.)

Jiangyu: What the heck, this is obviously man-made... What is this on it? Why is it so colorful? Are ELIDs into tattoos now?

Daiyan: This pattern should be a "cloud pattern." But this ferocious ELID from the contamination zone, with its colorful ribbons and exaggerated paintings, plus the blank eyes, looks a bit silly. It's really interesting.

Jiangyu: ...Why do I feel like you're doing some weird commentary?

Daiyan: Am I? Must be your imagination.

(The two walk to the foot of the giant beast.)

(The scaffolding erected for construction blocks the way. Daiyan raises her head through the scaffolding and observes carefully.)

Daiyan: In ancient legends, humans would hang effigies of auspicious beasts on their doors before the arrival of spring to ward off misfortune and ensure prosperity in the coming year.

Daiyan: This tradition evolved into a celebration of good fortune. In this satellite city, surrounded by farmland, the tradition has been incorporated into their festivities for several years now.

Daiyan: The "Crocodile-faced Deer" appears to be their chosen auspicious beast.

???: That's fascinating. How are you so knowledgeable?

(The conversation between Jiangyu and Daiyan attracts a worker who is painting the "Crocodile-faced Deer.")

(He jumps down, sits cross-legged on the scaffolding, and looks them up and down.)

Worker: Are you human? It's rare to hear Dolls discuss these customs. Don't you usually stick to programmed phrases like "Hello, thank you, goodbye, please visit again"? How do you know about these things?

Daiyan: There are diverse types of Dolls, each with specialized tasks. The type you mention primarily works in restaurants.

Daiyan: My knowledge of these customs comes from reading relevant information and making deductions based on the appearance of this structure.

Worker: A mechanical brain indeed. See it once and you remember it. Haha~ So, what do you do? How did you come across these legends? In this day and age, that information is hard to find.

Daiyan: ...We are currently employed at a restaurant.

Worker: Huh?

(The worker appears puzzled, frowning as he examines them again.)

Worker: ...Didn't you just say those Dolls are for restaurants? Did I mishear?

Jiangyu: Restaurants offer various types of work! We perform music in the restaurant!

Worker: Oh, okay, okay.

Worker: Even though you're Dolls, I'm quite happy you know about these things. I've been working here for so long, and people keep asking me the same questions repeatedly. It's so annoying.

Worker: This auspicious beast has a name, it's called "Yibo." Let me tell ya, the past few days have just been a warm-up for the celebration.

Worker: The day after tomorrow, on the actual celebration day, there will be more activities. This big guy will be the star of the show. You must come and see it.

Jiangyu: It? The star of the show?

Worker: Yes, on the celebration day, the most active young man in the city will climb the ladder to the top of the stage to "dot the eyes" of this big guy.

Worker: This marks the climax of the celebration! Without this step, everyone would be dissatisfied!

Worker: Haha, it's already 7 o'clock. If you're interested, you can stay and watch for a while. After we finish up with this big guy, we're going to have a big feast.

(The worker pats Yibo's sturdy foreleg and returns to his post to continue working.)

(Daiyan smiles and bows slightly to the worker. Jiangyu, hearing about the celebration, becomes eager with anticipation.)

Jiangyu: The day after tomorrow is the celebration day! There will be more activities!

Jiangyu: Sis, we've been in CHE-02 for a week now, and all we've done is rehearse and perform. I'm so BORED that I could die! Let's clear our schedule for the day after tomorrow and go out and have fun, okay? Please?

Daiyan: You always want to play. When are we going to save enough money to repair Zhao Hui's body?

Jiangyu: But Sis, you also need to write a theme song for this city, right? Just relying on information and hearsay won't work. You have to immerse yourself in the city's atmosphere to truly understand its unique style.

Jiangyu: Sis... Sis~ Sis~! Just one day—no, no, no, just half a day, okay? Half a day, just half a day—

Daiyan: Alright, alright, I can't say no to you. Everyone has been working really hard lately.

Daiyan: The day after tomorrow is the celebration day, so the restaurant will likely close early. Let's join the celebration—and also see Yibo in action. We can all relax a bit.

Jiangyu: Yay! Sis is the best in the world!

Jiangyu: To thank my dear sister, tonight I'm going to show everyone the new drum beats I learned! Sis, you just wait to be amazed!

(Jiangyu cheers and spins around a few times, then hugs Daiyan to express her joy.)

Daiyan: Where did you learn these strange expressions? You sound just like Clarissa, always coming up with odd words...

Daiyan: But, I am a bit excited to see you using the drums for the first time to perform with me.

(They leave the open area and slowly walk into a nearby alley. The small shops along the street start opening their doors for business, and Jiangyu excitedly looks around.)

Jiangyu: Sis, look at this!

(Jiangyu proudly holds up a tiny glass bottle and shows it to Daiyan.)

Jiangyu: Didn't you say you wanted to collect inspiration? Do you think this bottle would be suitable? It even has a string on it, like a pendant!

Daiyan: "Inspiration" isn't something you can collect as an object...

(The small glass bottle pendant swings in Jiangyu's hand, glittering in the light. Daiyan's gaze is drawn to the small glass bottle, and she takes the pendant from Jiangyu's hand.)

Zhao Hui: If you like it, why not buy it?

(A cool voice comes from behind a pile of goods not far away. The pile of goods slowly moves towards them.)

Daiyan: Zhao Hui! Sorry to trouble you. Did you manage to buy everything the boss added at the last minute?

(Stopping the cart filled with goods, Zhao Hui looks at Daiyan and nods.)

Zhao Hui: The boss added ten bags of dried potatoes, and I also picked up the items you hadn't checked off the list. Even borrowing a cart from the boss, I still couldn't fit everything.

(Zhao Hui stands before them, pushing a cart piled high with food supplies and holding boxes and bags in her arms.)

(Daiyan's gaze settles on the connection between Zhao Hui's right arm and body, where several bearings emit a faint creaking sound.)

Daiyan: It was supposed to be the two of us doing the shopping... Now you've done it all. Is your right arm okay?

Zhao Hui: It's fine.

(After quickly buying the pendant, Daiyan reaches out to take half of the goods Zhao Hui is holding. Zhao Hui doesn't refuse, and they naturally exchange some of the items.)

(When Daiyan turns back to look for Jiangyu, she has already disappeared.)

Daiyan: Is Jiangyu a bit too hyperactive? She was here just a minute ago. I'm trying not to nag too much, but seeing her so reckless still makes me worried.

Zhao Hui: She hasn't done anything particularly out of line recently. You could trust her a bit more.

Daiyan: I hope she's really matured. The crowd is growing. Where could she have gone?

Daiyan: It's already 7:20. We need to hurry back to the restaurant.

Daiyan: Wait, I think I hear music?

Zhao Hui: I saw a float parade organized by the residents when I was shopping on the neighboring street.

Daiyan: So, Jiangyu went... to see the parade?

Zhao Hui: Probably. When I saw you, she was yelling and running towards this alley.

Zhao Hui: This way.

(With a neutral expression, Zhao Hui turns and leads Daiyan towards the street where the parade is happening.)

Daiyan: Sorry to trouble you again... Ah, wait a moment...

(Zhao Hui takes some of the goods Daiyan is holding. Daiyan quickly pulls out her ringing communicator.)

Daiyan: Jiangyu? Where are you now—

(Before Daiyan can finish, Jiangyu's voice eagerly comes through the noisy background.)

Jiangyu: Sis! It's a float parade!

Jiangyu: It's so lively here, and there are moving, animated lights on the floats! Wow, something weird just popped out of nowhere, like a giant lantern! Hahaha.

Jiangyu: Wait... is that... a Dinergate?!

In Battle

Jiangyu: Why are there so many S.F. units here? It's too dangerous!

Jiangyu: No, I can't just stand by and do nothing! Civilians could get hurt!

Jiangyu: Sis! Ah right, the communication was cut off earlier... Sis should be on her way, right?

Jiangyu: Forget it, I have no choice but to handle this myself! Watch me bring them to justice!

AD-1-2 Little Devil's Mark

In Battle

Jiangyu: These Sangvis Ferri are too weak!

???: Stop, stop right now!

Jiangyu: Why are you protecting the Sangvis Ferri? They must be here to destroy the city!

???: That's so mean— (Sob), you called my Dinergates "Sangvis Ferri"—

Jiangyu: Pets? ...Did I make a mistake...?

After Battle

(When Daiyan and Zhao Hui arrive, the float parade has already stopped. A large crowd gathers in the middle of the parade, whispering and talking about something. A sweet, aggrieved voice comes from the center of the crowd.)

???: (Sob), I already said these are not Sangvis Ferri Dinergates, they are Sharkry's adorable pet Dinergates! Sharkry spent a lot of money and a long time modifying them just to bring joy to everyone—

?: I-I didn't mean to! I already apologized, didn't I?

Daiyan: That voice... It's Jiangyu!

(The two quickly squeeze through the crowd. In the center, Jiangyu is confronting a Doll dressed in an exaggerated outfit.)

Sharkry: Apologize? If an apology was enough—

(The Doll who calls herself "Sharkry" suddenly turns to glare at the murmuring crowd, seeming to analyze their words.)

Sharkry: If an apology was enough, then—that would be great!

Sharkry: But Sharkry's performance was ruined, the meticulously prepared costume is in tatters, my hairstyle is a mess, and the pet Dinergates are all on their backs!

Sharkry: These ribbons took Sharkry an entire night to put inside their bellies! I wanted to have them spit out the ribbons at the Zucchero Café for the manager to see, but now, (Sob)... it's all... ruined!

(The Doll points to four or five pitiful pet Dinergates lying on the ground, starting to sob. The Dinergates' tiny legs feebly wave in the air, occasionally spitting out a ribbon as if to confirm Sharkry's words.)

(The Doll's sudden shift from anger to pitiful crying is so abrupt, and the sobbing so exaggerated, that even Daiyan is momentarily stunned.)

Jiangyu: Stop pretending! And what did you say, pet Dinergates? Dinergates? Pets? You know they are Dinergates, yet you treat them as pets. What are you trying to do?!

Sharkry: (Sob)—waaaah—

(The Doll sits down abruptly, covering her face and crying loudly.)

(Daiyan quickly grabs Jiangyu, who looks like she's ready to argue again.)

Daiyan: I'm really sorry, please accept our apologies! Jiangyu truly didn't mean it; there were some... misunderstandings! As her sister, I apologize on behalf of my reckless little sister!

Jiangyu: Huh? Sis, you're here? But you see, it's not my fault, right? You saw the S.F. paint job too—

Jiangyu: ...Alright, alright, I'm a mature Doll now. I need to have self-control and not argue with this girl...

(Jiangyu makes a zipping motion across her lips, covers her mouth with her hand, and crouches behind Zhao Hui. With a stern face, Zhao Hui grabs her and pulls her out, pushing her head down.)

Zhao Hui: ...

Jiangyu: Zhao Hui, why are you pressing my head down?! Alright, alright, I was wrong, I was wrong—just stop crying, okay?

Sharkry: Waaaah—! Sharkry is so sad—!

Jiangyu: What do you want? Name your terms!

Sharkry: (Sob)... Everyone saw it, Sharkry is the pure “victim” here.

Sharkry: But Sharkry isn’t an unreasonable little devil. I won’t make things difficult for you.

Sharkry: Just pay this—amount in compensation, and Sharkry will forgive you, alright?

(Sharkry proudly holds up two fingers.)

Jiangyu: Two ounces of Sardis gold? That’s not too bad, I can still afford it... no problem!

Sharkry: Twenty.

Jiangyu: Are you robbing me?!

(Jiangyu glares at Sharkry and moves closer, but Zhao Hui steps in to stop her and then crouches down to inspect the pet Dinergates' damage.)

Zhao Hui: These pet Dinergates aren’t totaled; they can be repaired.

Zhao Hui: Your costume and props aren’t made of expensive materials, so there should be room to negotiate the price, right?

Sharkry: W-What are you doing? Sharkry's performance outfit is handmade and priceless! And my beloved pet Dinergates, they’re the latest models...

(Sharkry, intimidated by Zhao Hui's stern tone, steps back, but quickly puts her hands on her hips, pouting angrily.)

Sharkry: These are Sharkry's precious treasures! They can’t be measured by ordinary standards!

Daiyan: Miss Sharkry, since we damaged your belongings, we will certainly compensate you. However, we hope to negotiate the amount and the payment time...

Citizen: Oi, are you going to move or not? The rest of the parade is waiting!

(Their conversation is interrupted by the crowd’s impatient voices, and the next float in line bumps into the back of Sharkry's float.)

Sharkry: Alright, alright, stop rushing, Sharkry is moving now~

Sharkry: Hmm, you were saying?

Daiyan: Regarding the loss caused by my sister Jiangyu, could we have a more objective and reasonable assessment?

(Sharkry waves her hand absentmindedly, then hurriedly searches her costume, pulls out a crumpled flier, signs it with an eyebrow pencil, and thrusts it into Daiyan's hands.)

Sharkry: No time, no time! Now isn't the time to haggle.

Sharkry: When you're ready with the compensation, come to the address on this flier!

Sharkry: A fair warning: don't even think about dodging Sharkry's debt. Sharkry has memorized everyone's faces perfectly!

(After saying that seriously, Sharkry commands her pet Dinergates. The pet Dinergates awkwardly climb back onto the float. Those unable to move are picked up and thrown onto the float by Sharkry.)

Sharkry: Okay, okay, next is—Show♥Time~

Jiangyu: Sis, Zhao Hui, did you see that? In the blink of an eye, she changed into a new performance outfit! Can we buy some of those amazing props? It would definitely double our audience!

(Watching the float gradually move away, Zhao Hui shrugs without speaking, only gesturing with her chin towards Daiyan, who is sighing nearby.)

Daiyan: I think the band's expenses would also double.

Daiyan: Right now... the most important thing is to get back to the restaurant on time.

Daiyan: Please don't be late for tonight's performance, okay? My dear sister.

AD-1-3 Noisy Transposition

Before Battle

Boss: ...Carrots, potatoes, mushrooms, beets, and...

Daiyan: And potato flowers, right here.

(After returning to the restaurant, Jiangyu follows Zhao Hui to prepare for the evening performance, while Daiyan checks the procurement list in the kitchen with the boss.)

Boss: I see them. Hmm, the list looks fine. I hope these ingredients will be enough...

Boss: Even though these are just tasteless instant foods, it's already quite good that we managed to get them.

Daiyan: The amount of ingredients is almost three times the usual. Are there really that many guests tonight?

Boss: There weren't initially, but this afternoon we received a booking from an engineering team to celebrate the completion of the main stage for the festival.

Boss: My little restaurant's regular stock can't feed dozens of hungry construction workers. They also specifically requested drinks and desserts made with potato flowers, which is why Zhao Hui went out to buy more supplies.

Daiyan: Can we fit so many people here?

Boss: We can clear some space and rearrange the tables and chairs...

Boss: Ah, don't worry about that. You just focus on the performance. By the way, do you have any songs that can stimulate appetite?

Daiyan: Hmm? Ah, I don't think there are such songs, right?

Boss: Then just play some lively tunes to liven up the atmosphere. If the customers are happy, they'll eat more, and we'll make more money.

Daiyan: I... I'll try my best.

Boss: I need to go greet the guests. You go ahead and prepare.

(Leaving the kitchen, Daiyan walks onto the stage. Zhao Hui is tuning the sound system, while Jiangyu is clumsily fussing with her drums, but her ears are perked up, listening to what's happening on Daiyan's side.)

(Seeing Daiyan coming, Jiangyu runs over, giggling, and hugs her arm.)

Jiangyu: Hehe, songs that stimulate appetite, I know one!

Jiangyu: I wanna eat, wanna eat, wanna eat, I really wanna eat~ Even though I just had three bowls of rice five minutes ago...

(Daiyan flicks Jiangyu's forehead.)

Daiyan: Stop fooling around. What kind of strange song is that... Are you guys done with your tasks?

Jiangyu: Instruments, sound system, and microphone are set up, and the lighting is ready. We're just waiting for you, Sis!

Jiangyu: Also, look, how about I set the drums here? In case I hit the wrong note later, you can give me a signal or something...

Daiyan: Oh—I recall, my dear sister is THE fearless Griffin elite T-Doll, right? How come you're nervous now?

Jiangyu: I'm a FORMER Griffin elite T-Doll! Sis, don't make fun of me at a time like this...

Jiangyu: There are so many people tonight! But... they seem a bit strange? It's making me nervous...

Daiyan: Strange?

Daiyan: Huh? Have the guests already taken their seats? I didn't notice...

Jiangyu: Yeah, yeah, that's why I said it's strange—a bunch of people, not talking, just sitting there drinking with gloomy faces, like they owe each other money. It doesn't feel like a banquet at all!

(Listening to Jiangyu's complaints, Daiyan looks at the audience.)

(Just as Jiangyu described, there's no festive atmosphere among the audience. The workers they met earlier are also in the crowd, but no one is talking, and the mood is heavy.)

(In a corner, there's a person with a paper notebook on the table, sitting away from others, appearing out of place.)

Daiyan: The atmosphere today is indeed a bit strange. The boss said it's a celebration banquet, but the guests all look so serious...

(Daiyan pauses, a hint of unease in her voice.)

Daiyan: Alright, the performance is about to start.

Daiyan: Jiangyu, Zhao Hui, I want to change the next piece to the minor tune we adapted from the original piece, is that okay?

Jiangyu: The one from the purification zone?

Daiyan: Yes.

(Soon, the restaurant lights dim, signaling the start of the performance. Daiyan sits poised at the guzheng, concentrating on plucking the strings, quickly immersing herself in the music. Soothed by the music, Jiangyu gradually relaxes and carefully adds her drumbeats to the tune.)

(Everything seems normal—until unexpectedly, before they finish playing, a commotion erupts in the audience.)

Boss: Everyone, please, let's talk calmly, sit down, sit down...

Boss: Hey, hey, that customer over there, don't get too excited, don't throw the bowl!

Agitated Customer: Who's the turncoat? I was tricked into coming here, okay?!

Gloomy Customer: What's all the yelling for! I'm telling you, we shouldn't have done this from the start!

Anxious Customer: Hah? You're thinking of backing out now? You think you're the only one taking risks?

Gloomy Customer: I just don't want everyone to march to their deaths!

Irritated Customer: Shut up! Yelling like that, do you want the whole world to know?

Gloomy Customer: Esther has already decided. She hasn't even spoken yet, so why are you making a fuss?

Irritated Customer: What does she know?! It's her fault we got dragged into this!

Boss: Oh dear, what's going on here? Everyone, calm down—please don't break my stuff!

(Sounds of glasses and chairs being thrown fill the air, with occasional sobbing in the background. Daiyan watches the chaos from the stage, anxious but unable to stop playing, observing the crowd while continuing the performance.)

(As Daiyan plays a particular melody, a person in the corner suddenly looks up.)

???: This...! How does she know this tune?

Boss: What are you standing there for? Look at the mess in the store!

Boss: Zhao Hui—Zhao Hui! And Daiyan! What are you standing there for! Aren't you Dolls? Help me pull these people apart! Quickly, quickly!

Jiangyu: Oh, oh, okay!

(Zhao Hui and Jiangyu jump off the stage to stop the fighting customers. Daiyan hurriedly tries to move the guzheng off the stage. Just as she is about to cover it with a cloth, a hand presses down heavily on the instrument.)

???: That piece you just played... Are you here to spy on us?!

Daiyan: Wha... What?

(The sudden appearance of a woman with a name tag reading "Esther" catches Daiyan off guard. The situation changes too quickly for Daiyan to respond immediately.)

(Seeing Daiyan's silence, the woman named "Esther" anxiously looks around, as if worried about being discovered.)

Esther: Damn it... Are you all trying to drive me to my death?! You'll regret this!

(The strange woman glares at the confused Daiyan, then turns and leaves.)

(Putting together what she just witnessed, Daiyan quickly senses that there might be a conspiracy behind this incident. She hesitates for a moment.)

(Given her current role, she doesn't need to get involved in such matters, but...)

(Daiyan quickly makes a decision. She stands up and communicates via Level II.)

Daiyan: Zhao Hui, Jiangyu, stay in the restaurant and help the boss manage the situation. Keep an eye on the guzheng on stage for me.

Daiyan: A woman was acting very suspiciously, and I suspect she's connected to this disturbance. I'm going to follow her and check it out.

Jiangyu: Right now?

Zhao Hui: Got it. Contact us if you need help.

Jiangyu: Huh? Zhao Hui, you—? Alright, call me if you need anything, call me first!

Daiyan: Okay, I'm counting on you two.

(Leaving the restaurant, Daiyan follows the woman closely. Noticing her tail, the woman quickens her pace, trying to lose Daiyan in the winding alleys.)

(Daiyan gives her no chance to escape, cornering her in a dead end, forcing the woman to face her. The woman pulls out a small knife from her pocket, brandishing it threateningly.)

Esther: What do you want?!

Daiyan: I mean no harm, miss. You'd better put the knife away before you hurt yourself.

Esther: So, you're really here to spy on me, aren't you?!

Esther: Stop pushing me. I'll fulfill my promises! After that, we owe each other nothing!

Daiyan: ...I don't understand what you're talking about?

Esther: Get lost!

(As Daiyan tries to find a way to calm the agitated woman down, Esther suddenly lunges at her with the knife.)

(Daiyan remains unfazed by the threat, easily sidestepping and grabbing the woman's knife hand.)

(The woman cries out in pain, dropping the knife. Daiyan twists her arm and pins her against the wall. The woman struggles but is no match for Daiyan's strength.)

Esther: Damn it! You bastards! I knew you were up to no good from the start! If you have the guts, kill me now!

Daiyan: I'm just trying to understand the situation. Your behavior is very unusual. Is there something you're hiding?

Esther: You played that tune and still claim you're not one of them?!

Daiyan: Them? Who do you mean by them?

???: Miss Esther, it's not good to speak carelessly.

(A sinister voice comes from behind Daiyan. Before she can turn around, she hears the muffled sounds of silenced gunshots and feels her body being hit by bullets.)

(Daiyan recognizes the sound of a suppressed handgun. Her systems start reporting multiple damages.)

Esther: Stay back!!!

(Hit by multiple bullets, Daiyan releases Esther. The woman immediately flees, dropping something in her haste.)

Daiyan: Is this... her notebook?

(As her consciousness fades, Daiyan collapses, instinctively grabbing the notebook and hiding it in her clothing.)

(Her visual modules shut down, but she hears two sets of footsteps approaching.)

???: This countryside bumpkin sure runs fast.

?: She won't get far. If that Doll hadn't taken the bullets, she'd be dead already...

???: But why is there a Doll here? Did the Non-Military Forces Management Bureau get involved?

???: I didn't see any such Doll in the bureau's files. And dressed so gaudily, she might just be a passerby.

?: Either way, we can't let her keep her visual records. Destroy her cognitive module.

(Two more muffled gunshots hit Daiyan's cognitive module, but don't penetrate.)

???: Tsk, didn't go through. Give me a moment to dismantle it. This Doll's body is high-grade; even a handgun can't penetrate.

?: How does a regular Doll have such protection? Maybe she's—

???: Wait, someone's coming. We need to leave.

?: What about this Doll?

?: She had her back to us; she couldn't have seen our faces. Let's go!

(The footsteps quickly retreat, and after a while, another set of footsteps approaches Daiyan.)

?: Couldn't find the target. She must have left early. We need intelligence support. Wait, I see a Doll on the ground—

?: Is this... Daiyan?

In Battle

Daiyan: No... My body is severely damaged.

Daiyan: I need to take emergency measures... Shutting down other modules might preserve my cognitive data...

Daiyan: Jiangyu should be able to find me. I just need to hold on until then...

AD-1-4 Chaotic Interlude

Before Battle

(One hour ago.)

(After a short period of artificial rainfall, the stone pavement in front of the café is thoroughly cleaned.)

Sharkry: Whew—another busy day has ended, and today's results were quite good too♥
If only that little incident in the evening hadn't happened...

(Sharkry reaches out to turn off the neon sign displaying the café's special drinks and prepares to bring it inside.)

(As she moves, she hears slightly heavy footsteps approaching from behind her.)

Sharkry: Sorry, dear customer, the café is closed for today♥ Please come back tomorrow...

Commander: Is this... the Zuccherò Café?

(Sharkry puts down the sign, looks at me up and down, and comes to her own conclusion.)

Sharkry: Dear customer... you're not here for coffee, are you?

Commander: You're a smart Doll. Is Miss Springfield here?

Sharkry: So, you're looking for the manager. Please come inside~

(Following the short Doll, I enter the modestly decorated but very homelike café. The interior layout is reminiscent of the café at the old Griffin base, making me feel like I've stepped back in time.)

(As my eyes wander around the café, Springfield quickly comes out from the kitchen.)

Springfield: Commander?

(She has already been informed of my arrival, but her face still shows a look of delight. Despite ten years passing, her attire and demeanor remain unchanged.)

(She leads me to a seat by the window. Looking outside, the neon lights illuminate the skyscrapers and the barrier walls of the satellite city.)

(“Springfield has truly found a good place”, I thought to myself. Her voice then brings me back to reality.)

Springfield: Commander, please have a seat.

Commander: Thank you.

(Springfield and I pull out chairs and sit at the table, just as Sharkry comes over with the menu, as if on cue.)

Sharkry: Commander, may I call you that?

Sharkry: Since you’re already here, why not try our signature drink, the Super Caramel Macchiato? It’s our specialty!

Sharkry: If you don’t order one... this month’s sales target won’t be met... Our café is so poor it might go out of business... Commander, you wouldn’t want to see that happen, would you?

(Sharkry puts on a tearful expression. Although I’m used to such theatrics from Dolls, I decide it’s best to go along with it for now.)

Commander: Uh... alright, I’ll take two cups, please.

Sharkry: Thank you for ordering~ I’ll get started on those right away!

Springfield: How can I let the Commander pay! Sharkry—

Sharkry: Manager, I’m just thinking of the café...

Sharkry: Besides, you haven’t properly introduced Sharkry yet...

(Springfield looks at me apologetically and sighs.)

Springfield: This is Sharkry, our resident idol at the café.

Commander: What a cute idol. With you here, I’m sure the café sees a lot of business, right?

Sharkry: Of course! With the super idol Sharkry around, everyone's hearts will melt♥

(Sharkry strikes a pose that she clearly practiced a lot. Is calling oneself an idol a popular trend among Dolls now?)

Springfield: Don't mind her; she has that kind of personality.

Commander: It's fine, I'm used to it. I have similar Dolls on my team as well.

Springfield: Is that so? As expected of the Commander...

(Springfield nods thoughtfully, then turns to Sharkry.)

Springfield: Sharkry, please go make the Commander's coffee.

Sharkry: Okay! I'm on it~!

(Sharkry dashes to the kitchen. I look around and see the café's name—"Zuccherò"—emblazoned on the counter.)

Commander: The Zuccherò Café—Springfield, you've realized your dream.

Springfield: Thanks to everyone's help, I've finally taken a small step forward.

Commander: This is a wonderful café. It's great that you've achieved your goal.

(Perhaps sensing the slight melancholy in my words, Springfield gives a gentle smile and leans in a bit closer.)

Springfield: Aren't you also working towards your goals, Commander?

Commander: Me? I'm just surviving day by day.

Springfield: The Commander has their own way of moving forward.

Springfield: I understand that our current situation is because you bore the burden of all costs back then. Without your decisions, we Dolls wouldn't have been able to do anything, let alone open a café like this.

(Springfield glances around her café, and I can see in her eyes how much she cherishes it.)

Springfield: The establishment of Zuccherò, and my first step towards realizing my dream, is partly thanks to you.

Springfield: So, please don't say you're just surviving. Maybe those who don't know you would think so, but you can't fool me.

Commander: ...Hearing you say that makes me feel much better.

(I smile wryly. Springfield, sensing my mood, looks a bit more at ease.)

Springfield: However, I'm surprised you could come here, Commander. I didn't expect them to allow you to break the agreement.

Commander: Kalin helped me a lot, and they need someone to do things *they* don't want to handle themselves again.

Springfield: Commander... You left because you didn't want to be manipulated by *them* anymore. Although we all missed you, we also didn't want you to be in danger every time. But now...

Commander: There are many reasons; it's complicated. But in any case, Kalin needs me, and I have to support her.

Commander: You'll help us too, right?

Springfield: Of course, if you need anything, please let me know.

Commander: Kalin mentioned you have some resources in this city's security department. I need to locate someone through the system.

Springfield: Who is it?

Commander: I'm tracking leads about our enemy—specifically the Girard Group's funding pipeline. Have you heard of them?

Springfield: The Girard Group... It's a popular name lately.

Springfield: They set up multiple branches in CHE-02, which brought a lot of people to the city.

Springfield: For us, it did boost our business. But I saw the news about the unrest in Odesa...

Springfield: Their branches here are also undergoing shutdowns and reorganizations.

Commander: Yeah, they were never here for charity; they were brewing conspiracies in various cities.

Commander: Although Odesa has begun cracking down on them, their remnants likely remain in other cities.

Commander: Kalin tracked the Girard Group's illicit funds flowing into this city. Besides abnormal financial flows, there are also controlled substances... Chemicals that can be used to make explosives have been smuggled into the city.

Commander: According to transport records, these materials ended up with a construction team from another satellite city.

Springfield: This satellite city has a high influx of people, and the safety regulations for individuals are more relaxed compared to other cities.

Commander: Yes, that's a loophole. With the city about to host a large celebration, we suspect that these funds and materials will be used for some radical criminal activities.

Commander: The person in charge of this criminal activity is a woman named Esther and her associates.

Springfield: ...Their goal is to sabotage the celebration?

Commander: This is just the first step. They likely aim to cause significant disruption, leading to further retaliatory actions afterward.

Springfield: I see. It sounds like a serious case. However, wouldn't it be better to leave this to the security department?

Commander: The security department will soon start arresting the people on the list, but those arrested will just be scapegoats.

Commander: The real masterminds won't be caught, nor will they be pursued. The powers behind this are too significant for them to confront.

Springfield: Hmm... That does sound complicated. I understand why you came here, Commander. I will communicate with the city's security department and ask them to cooperate with us as much as possible.

Springfield: As for the woman named Esther... I will inform the security department. They should be able to locate her quickly through surveillance.

Commander: Also, do you have any trustworthy Tactical Dolls in this city that we can call upon without violating any agreements?

Springfield: Didn't Groza Squad come with you?

Commander: You know about them? Your information network is impressive as always...

Springfield: Everyone cares about the Commander's matters, so I occasionally hear things.

Commander: Groza Squad is on another mission. To keep a low profile, I didn't bring any other Dolls. It would be best to have enough combat-ready Dolls for support when we take action.

Springfield: Tactical Dolls that meet all those conditions are indeed rare—

Sharkry: Two large Super Caramel Macchiatos coming up! Sharkry also cast a happiness spell on the Commander's cup♥

(Sharkry dashes out of the kitchen, placing the two coffees on their table with a dramatic flourish and making a heart gesture with her hands.)

Springfield: There's one right in front of you.

(Both Springfield and I look at Sharkry, making her feel a sudden sense of foreboding.)

Sharkry: Wh-What is it?

Springfield: Commander, can you hear me?

Commander: Loud and clear, go ahead.

Springfield: I've sent you Esther's location. According to the security department's surveillance records, she should still be at the restaurant, dining with her colleagues. You have enough time to secure her.

Commander: Does she have any weapons or guards?

Springfield: No, she's just an ordinary engineer. I think she's merely a scapegoat. She has no criminal record or combat experience; she's a very typical civilian.

Commander: A civilian tasked with making bombs... The world has truly gone mad.

Springfield: Maybe she's being coerced. We can question her once she's in custody.

Commander: True. How are the external preparations?

Springfield: Everything's set. The security department won't patrol that area for the next half hour. We also have transport vehicles on standby, ready to move on your command.

Commander: Got it, keep in touch.

(I close the communication and look at Sharkry sitting across from them. She's gazing out the window, muttering to herself.)

Sharkry: Why has it been so unlucky these days... My painstakingly made Dinergates got smashed, and now I'm being sent out for field work after hours...

Commander: Sharkry, did you say something?

Sharkry: No, no, I'm just saying it's an honor to be out here with the Commander~!

Commander: Really? There are a lot more Dolls these days who seem preoccupied, is that the latest trend?

Sharkry: No, no, Sharkry has no worries at all~

Commander: I'm just joking. You seem a bit nervous; is this your first time dealing with something like this?

Sharkry: Sharkry used to be an idol, and I still am! So catching bad guys is a bit unfamiliar...

Sharkry: But since the manager gave me this task, I'll do my best to complete it! That's also an idol's duty♥

Commander: So this is also an idol's duty... Well, Dolls with high likeability might be more effective.

Commander: Sharkry, keep your weapon hidden. Let's approach them with the intention of talking first. Only use force if necessary.

Sharkry: Sharkry's got it! By the way, Commander, when we catch that Esther person, won't the security department notice?

Commander: Springfield has already coordinated with the local security department. They won't interfere with our operation.

Commander: The security department provided her location. They've been monitoring these people for a while but have not taken action yet.

Sharkry: Why? Isn't catching criminals their job?

Commander: ...There are complex reasons behind it. In short, we're eliminating the risk for them, and they're grateful for it.

Sharkry: Sounds complicated... Sharkry doesn't quite understand...

Commander: It's okay if you don't understand; it's not that important.

(Soon, the pair arrive near their destination. After getting out of the car, the restaurant indicated by Springfield's intel is right in front of them.)

(However, contrary to expectations, a fierce argument is happening inside the restaurant.)

Commander: What's going on?

Sharkry: It looks like there's a fight inside!

Commander: Springfield, there's a brawl in the restaurant. The situation might have changed. I'm going in to check.

Springfield: Copy. I'll make sure the security department cooperates. Stay safe.

Commander: Got it.

(Sharkry and I quickly approach the entrance. Looking inside, various people are pushing and arguing, while the Boss is desperately pleading for them to stop.)

Boss: Stop fighting, oh my god, stop fighting! Jiangyu, Zhao Hui! Control the situation!

Jiangyu: I'm trying! There are ten of them, and just the two of us!

(To my surprise, a Doll once known as Type 97 is holding down two burly men. Another Doll, whom I've not seen before, seems to be negotiating with the person that seems to be in charge.)

Zhao Hui: Does this count as extra pay? Security services weren't included.

Boss: Huh? Is this the time to talk about pay?!

Zhao Hui: Dolls can't harm humans casually. If the security department shows up, it'll be hard to explain. We need compensation that matches the risk.

(Sharkry is startled by the chaotic scene but quickly recognizes the twin-tailed Doll she was haggling with earlier.)

Sharkry: Ah! Isn't that the clumsy Doll who destroyed my beloved Dinergates!

Jiangyu: Ugh! Lantern girl? What are you doing here?!

Sharkry: Lantern girl... how rude! I'm the star idol of the Zucchero Café!

Jiangyu: What are you doing here? Are you here to collect the debt? We said we'd pay for the damages; you don't have to be in such a rush!

Sharkry: I'm not here for that! I'm here on a mission with the Commander!

Jiangyu: Commander?!

(Jiangyu freezes for a moment, not expecting to reunite with me in such a chaotic situation.)

(I quickly scan the faces of the people present but don't see Esther. Is the intel incorrect?)

(I refocus on Jiangyu, who is still in shock. I wave my hand in front of her face to bring her back to reality.)

Commander: 97? What are you doing here?

Jiangyu: C-C-C-C-Commander! It's really you!

Commander: Yes, it's really me. 97, why are you fighting here?

Jiangyu: I'm called Jiangyu now! And I'm not fighting, I'm defending myself against these troublemakers!

Commander: Uh, okay. Jiangyu, get the situation under control. I have some questions for you.

Jiangyu: Okay, give me just a sec!

(Jiangyu immediately switches from her previous lackluster demeanor to displaying impressive combat skills. She subdues the brawling humans and ties their arms with a metal rod she pulls from a nearby chair.)

Boss: Ah! My expensive designer chairs!

Zhao Hui: Be grateful. If these people kept wrecking the place, your losses would be more than just a few chairs.

(Ignoring the Boss's cries, Jiangyu bounces over to me, who notices a familiar guzheng in the background.)

(Is 95 here too?)

Commander: Jiangyu, what happened here?

Jiangyu: My sister and I, along with... Oh, by the way, this is Zhao Hui.

Jiangyu: We were performing at this restaurant when these diners suddenly started fighting. We're just as confused as you are.

Commander: Is there someone named Esther here?

Jiangyu: I think I heard that name during the performance?

Zhao Hui: Someone ran up to Daiyan earlier and then dashed out. Daiyan followed them. It might be that person.

Commander: Daiyan, that's 95... She chased after them?

(I feel uneasy, sensing that the person who ran out might be Esther. If so, Daiyan could be in danger.)

Commander: Jiangyu, do you still have your fire control core?

Jiangyu: Of course, it's in perfect condition!

Commander: Good, grab your weapon and come with Sharkry and me.

Jiangyu: Got it.

Commander: Springfield, we've subdued the brawlers. After we leave, have the security department take them in. They might know something.

Springfield: Got it. Any sign of Esther?

Commander: She left the restaurant early. I'll pursue her next.

Springfield: Roger that. The transport is on standby.

Commander: Alright, wait for my signal. Over and out.

(After ending the communication, I prepare for the next steps as an unfamiliar Doll approaches us.)

Commander: You must be Zhao Hui...? The security department will be here soon. Until then, please keep the situation under control.

Zhao Hui: You really do take charge quickly, even with Dolls you don't know.

Commander: This is a special case. No one here can leave. Can I count on you?

Zhao Hui: I'll handle it.

Jiangyu: She's got it! Commander, let's go. Is my sister in danger?!

Commander: Possibly.

(Jiangyu interrupts my conversation with Zhao Hui, grabs her weapon from her bag, and rushes out. Sharkry and I quickly follow her out of the restaurant.)

Commander: Do you know where Daiyan is?

Jiangyu: My sister and I are connected in Level II. She's not far ahead!

(They turn into an alley, but despite the coordinates being right in front of them, the maze-like alleyways make it difficult to reach the exact spot. At each dead end, Jiangyu stamps her foot in frustration.)

Jiangyu: What a terrible place! Why are there so many dead ends?!

(Pew! Pew!)

Sharkry: Those are gunshots?

(I quickly recognize the low, muffled sound as that of a handgun with a suppressor.)

(Anyone using a suppressor must be a serious threat.)

Commander: Lock and load. Head towards the gunfire!

(Guided by the sound, they quickly close in on the coordinates. Two more muffled gunshots echo, and at the end of the alley, I see two blurred figures.)

(Hearing their footsteps, the two figures quickly flee, disappearing into the maze of alleys.)

Commander: They sure run fast...

Sharkry: Should we pursue them, Commander?

Commander: No, the situation is unclear. We need to be cautious.

Commander: Springfield, we didn't find the target. She left earlier than expected.

Springfield: She should still be nearby. Do you need me to contact the security department to retrieve surveillance footage from the area?

Commander: Yes, we need intel support.

(I move closer to where the figures were and suddenly notice a Doll lying on the ground.)

Commander: Wait, I see a Doll down—

Commander: Is this... Daiyan?

Springfield: Daiyan is on the scene?!

Commander: Her body is severely damaged. We need to get her out of here immediately! Get the transport vehicle over now!

Springfield: Got it! I'll contact them now!

Jiangyu: Daiyan! Sister!

(Seeing Daiyan on the ground, Jiangyu rushes forward, but I quickly stop her.)

Commander: Don't go over there! The enemy might still be nearby! Check your corners!

Jiangyu: Y-Yes!

Commander: Sharkry, cover our six. Jiangyu, we'll each take a corner.

Sharkry: Alright... Yes, Commander!

(Jiangyu raises her gun and cautiously checks the alley exits, while I carefully inspect Daiyan for any traps or explosives.)

Jiangyu: Commander, I don't see any threats... Can I...?

Commander: Yes, Daiyan is clear to move. She's severely damaged; we need to get her to the repair bay immediately.

(Jiangyu rushes to Daiyan's side and begins assessing her damage.)

Jiangyu: Sister! Are you okay? Please don't scare me!

Sharkry: Isn't this the "elder sister" from earlier? How did she get so badly beaten?

Commander: The enemy moved faster than we anticipated. Jiangyu, carry Daiyan. The transport vehicle is almost here.

Commander: Sharkry, go back and inform Zhao Hui to bring all the luggage and follow us. We need to leave before the security department arrives.

Sharkry: Got it, I'll go right away!

Commander: Damn it... Daiyan, hang in there. You must be okay!

During Battle

Commander: Running into a security team now would be problematic. Before we leave, we must clear the firewalls and remove any records related to us. We can't leave any loose ends.

Jiangyu: Leave it to me, Commander!

Jiangyu: Commander, the cleanup is complete. No traces left! ...My sister will be okay, right?

Commander: We're leaving now. Sharkry, sitrep!

Sharkry: I've met up with the stern-faced Doll. We're on our way, Commander!

Commander: Good. Head to the designated extraction point immediately.

AM-1-1 Concave of Memories

(I glance at Springfield, who is also looking at me with concern.)

(Listening to Daiyan recount her previous experiences, I fall into deep thought.)

(Daiyan, noticing our expressions, realizes that she's encountered something entirely different from her past experiences.)

(She looks like she wants to ask questions but hesitates. I decide to tell her the truth.)

(I briefly explain the situation discussed earlier with Springfield and describe the events of our recent operation. Daiyan's face shows a worried expression.)

Daiyan: We actually got caught up in something like this... It's a good thing we met the Commander...

Commander: A stroke of luck in misfortune... I'm also surprised you got involved in this case, Daiyan.

Jiangyu: Sister suddenly rushed out. It was so strange!

Commander: Yes, Daiyan, why did you engage with our target?

Daiyan: I don't know... I just felt like there was great danger behind them. I couldn't sit idly by...

Zhao Hui: And you almost got yourself killed.

Daiyan: ...I didn't expect someone to start shooting in the city. I had subdued that woman, Esther, but then I was suddenly attacked from behind... Ah—

Jiangyu: What's wrong? Are you hurt?

Daiyan: When Esther fled, she dropped a notebook. I used my last bit of strength to hide it in my clothes.

(Daiyan starts searching her clothes and soon pulls out a notebook.)

Commander: Is this what she dropped?

Daiyan: Yes, Commander, do you want to take a look?

Commander: Let's all take a look. We might find some clues.

(The Dolls gather around as Daiyan places the notebook on the table for everyone to see. The cover is frayed but free of stains, indicating it was well cared for.)

(Daiyan glances at me for confirmation, then starts flipping through the pages.)

Jiangyu: Huh? This person's handwriting is quite neat... But why is the handwriting in the back so messy? It looks completely different. Is this really her notebook?

Zhao Hui: Can one person's handwriting vary so much?

Commander: Typically, a person's handwriting is consistent. Handwriting can sometimes be used to verify someone's identity.

Commander: I don't see any signs of forgery here, so I suspect different people wrote the front and back sections. The content also seems different.

Daiyan: This is...

(As she flips through the pages, a yellowed photo appears. The photo shows a laughing woman holding a pen next to a little girl trying hard not to cry. Behind them is a field of white potato flowers.)

(Feeling the texture on the back of the photo, Daiyan turns it over to reveal a small bunch of dried white flowers pressed into the page.)

Daiyan: ...Potato flowers.

(Daiyan instinctively touches the glass bottle around her neck.)

Commander: The front seems to be filled with musings and poetry. The back part... Are these mechanical and engineering diagrams?

Springfield: This person is an engineer, right? That might be why she was chosen.

Commander: Yes, a fitting occupation with the necessary skills for such activities.

Jiangyu: Wow, a really serious job?

Commander: Look for anything suspicious.

Daiyan: ...There are some diagrams of pipes and circuits. It's unclear where they are, but there are many triangular markings.

Zhao Hui: Could it be a map for explosives?

Commander: It's hard to tell. There are also several places with heavily scribbled-over text.

Commander: Wait, this part isn't completely covered. It says...

(Daiyan picks up the notebook for a closer look. As she moves, a folded piece of paper falls out, which Jiangyu quickly catches.)

Jiangyu: This paper is so worn out and crumpled. It says... It says... "If you still have passionate, boiling blood in your heart, if you still hold longing and attachment for... U... Uza, then come..."

Jiangyu: What is this? It's all over the place.

Springfield: This style is similar to the promotional slogans Sharkry uses to attract customers. There's another line below, but it's scribbled out?

(I examine it closely. Despite the heavy scribbles, the words are still recognizable.)

Commander: ..."Revenge plan."

(The Dolls fall silent, seeing the words.)

Commander: Everyone, rest for tonight. We'll handle the rest. Especially you, Daiyan. Focus on recovering.

Daiyan: Ah... Yes, Commander.

(I motion for Daiyan to lie down and then signal Springfield with my eyes.)

(Understanding my intent, Springfield follows them out of the room.)

(Only a single lamp is lit in the café's lobby. Springfield and I find a table and sit down.)

(The dim light adds to my fatigue. I let out a deep sigh.)

Commander: It looks like the person Daiyan encountered is definitely our target.

Commander: The information in the notebook confirms she's planning something malicious. Do we have any new intel on her?

Springfield: I've found her file. She and her compatriots are from a place called "Uzamadeki."

(Springfield hands me the printed materials. I flip through them, seeing Esther's profile on the first page, followed by several others.)

(These people have one glaring commonality—they all come from the same place.)

Commander: "Uzamadeki"... I remember that place was...

Springfield: Yes, due to the advancement of the purification project, their hometown was taken over to establish the track for a Mobile Quarantine Wall. The entire town was requisitioned.

Springfield: These displaced people have been drifting between satellite cities ever since. They came here under the guise of festival construction workers.

Springfield: Many of the devices for the festival are made by them, and it's likely that the temporary facilities at the festival could be rigged to explode.

Commander: Displaced from their hometown... They have enough motive to seek revenge against the URNC.

Commander: Arresting them will quickly close the case, and all the blame will fall on them, likely ending in their execution.

Springfield: The mastermind behind this went to great lengths to hide their involvement.

Commander: Yes, they specifically used these unfortunate people to stage a terrorist attack during the festival. This festival is meant to gain support from the Green Zone residents for the purification project.

Commander: If explosions happen at the festival, it will cause chaos in the city. If the festival is canceled, the Rossartrists' prestige in the Green Zone will plummet. It's a double-edged strategy.

Springfield: Are you certain the Girard Group is behind this, including the attack on Daiyan?

Commander: The person who attacked Daiyan used a weapon with a suppressor, and the bullets recovered from her body were special steel-core rounds, which are difficult to obtain even for the underground gangs in the Green Zone. What do you think?

Springfield: If we're dealing with desperate criminals like the remnants of the Girard Group, we might be outmatched. Should we contact Kalina for support?

Commander: If I needed her help for something like this, she'd never let me live it down. Don't worry, we haven't been exposed yet. I'm confident we can pull this off.

Springfield: I understand, I'll follow your lead.

Commander: I'm sorry, Springfield... Am I putting you and this café in danger?

Springfield: Don't worry about that, Commander. I trust you'll complete the mission perfectly.

Springfield: Besides, if there's any unrest, the Zuccherò Café would inevitably be at risk.

Springfield: The important thing now is to find that key person. I've asked the security department to search for Esther with everything they've got. As soon as they find her, they'll rely on the information.

Commander: Hmm... After what happened, she's likely hiding and won't be easy to find.

Springfield: I suspect the attack on Daiyan was originally intended for Esther.

Commander: I think so too. But if that's the case, why would the masterminds try to silence her before the festival starts? Unless...

Springfield: Unless... Esther betrayed them.

Commander: Yes, that's the most likely scenario. She doesn't want to be part of this irreversible act, so the Girard remnants can't let her live.

Commander: If that's the case, we need to find her before they do. The sooner, the better.

Springfield: I'll urge the security department to locate her ASAP.

Commander: Hmm, I'll need more Dolls. If we're to find and protect Esther, we'll likely clash with the Girard Group's people. A tough fight is inevitable. Do we have any other allies besides Sharky?

Springfield: There are two more Dolls at the café with fire control cores.

Commander: Are they non-Griffin Dolls who won't violate the agreement?

Springfield: They're Centaureissi and Macchiato, or G36 and WA2000. That's their current names.

Commander: Them... I don't want to drag them into this. To be honest, I wouldn't want to involve you either if I had a choice.

Springfield: They, like me, would break any rules to help you, Commander.

Commander: That's what worries me...

Springfield: Finding trustworthy, non-Griffin Dolls is difficult. They're on their way back to the city and will be here in half a day.

Commander: The festival is tomorrow night, right?

Springfield: Yes...

Commander: Even if I wanted to, we can't wait that long. We need to act now to find the masterminds before the security department steps in or Esther gets killed.

(Springfield thinks for a moment, then nods. She stands up and unfastens her apron.)

Springfield: I understand. I'll join you in the next operation.

Daiyan: Please wait!

(Daiyan and her two teammates come out of their room, Daiyan still a bit unsteady but walking with urgency.)

Springfield: Daiyan, you haven't fully recovered yet. You shouldn't be moving around like this!

Daiyan: It's fine, Miss Springfield. I trust my body. Please stay in the back and support us as usual.

Daiyan: Jiangyu and I were frontline combat units, and Zhao Hui is just as capable as us. We're the best candidates to accompany the Commander on this mission!

Commander: ...Daiyan?

(I turn back to look at Daiyan, surprised. Despite her lingering weakness, her eyes are firm and resolute, sweeping away the hesitation and worry from before.)

Commander: But... you're no longer Griffin units, and I'm no longer a Griffin commander. From the perspective of the agreement, we shouldn't even be in contact...

Daiyan: Commander... Please allow me to fight by your side once more. Not because of Griffin, but because I am your T-Doll!

Jiangyu: Yeah! To be honest, fighting is way more interesting than working! Without the Commander, Griffin hardly gets any decent missions, it's so boring!

Jiangyu: And about that agreement—Springfield is helping the Commander too! If she can do it, why can't we?

Daiyan: Jiangyu... don't say such things!

Commander: ...Jiangyu is still as blunt as ever.

Springfield: That's true. If the Commander favors me too much, it'll be hard to explain to everyone at the next Griffin reunion...

Springfield: If Daiyan and the others lose their status because of the agreement, the Commander can always take them in with the Elmo.

Commander: Mm...

Springfield: Besides, if there's a risk of multiple temporary facilities at the festival being rigged to explode, we don't have nearly enough manpower.

Springfield: Daiyan and Jiangyu were elite units, and Zhao Hui seems very capable as well. With Sharkry and I, plus the reinforcements arriving in half a day, this team should be enough for you to complete the mission, Commander.

Commander: Hmm...

Daiyan: Commander, please give us orders like you used to!

(I look at the Dolls in front of me.)

(Even after all this time, they still trust me and are willing to risk everything for me. I can't help but feel warmth in my eyes. I quickly turn away to hide my emotions from them.)

Commander: I... I understand. Everyone, prepare for the mission. As soon as we get information on Esther, we move out. I owe you all for this.

Jiangyu: Yes! Finally, some action! I'm so happy, Sis. We can finally get back to what we love!

Daiyan: Alright, alright, Jiangyu, no need to be so loud about it.

Zhao Hui: Am I the only one who can't join in on the reminiscing?

Jiangyu: Oh, Zhao Hui, you're here.

Zhao Hui: I've been here the whole time... I just couldn't find a way into the conversation.

Jiangyu: No worries. After this mission, you'll be part of the team, and you'll quickly see how amazing the Commander is!

Zhao Hui: Really? The Commander is *that* amazing?

Commander: ...Jiangyu, are you complimenting or insulting me?

(As we're talking, Sharkry bursting in the room made me realize I'd been subconsciously wondering where she'd gone.)

Sharkry: Manager! The inbox you told me to watch has a message!

Springfield: It seems the security department has news.

(Springfield picks up the communicator Sharkry hands her, and her expression changes dramatically.)

Springfield: Commander, the security department reports they've found Esther in an abandoned warehouse, I've sent you the location. They're planning to make arrests in six hours and advise us to hurry.

Commander: Daiyan, do you remember her face?

Daiyan: Very clearly.

Commander: Good. Daiyan and I will enter the warehouse to secure Esther. Jiangyu and Zhao Hui, you'll keep watch around the perimeter for any Girard remnants.

Commander: Springfield, you and Sharkry will provide support and stay on standby. Once we have Esther, we'll take it from there.

Springfield: Yes, Commander. Everyone, let's get ready.

(Springfield nods and immediately starts preparing. I look at Daiyan and the others, feeling a renewed sense of determination.)

(It's time to get to work.)

AD-1-5 Silent Variation

In Battle

Commander: Daiyan, I need you to infiltrate the warehouse district's management system. How's it looking?

Daiyan: Commander, I've already accessed the system, but it seems someone has prepped it against intrusions.

Commander: Such unnecessary "enthusiasm." How's information control?

Daiyan: I've isolated the target area. There won't be any chain reactions.

Commander: Good. Quickly clear out these "canaries." We're short on time.

Daiyan: Yes, Commander.

After Battle

(We reach the vicinity of the abandoned warehouse.)

(It's a hidden building near a train station, seemingly perfect for storing illicit items.)

(Due to the vertical layout of the Green Zone city, We find a vantage point overlooking the entire warehouse with ease.)

(The warehouse has a large yard, likely for unloading trucks. The only entrance is controlled by two rusted double iron doors.)

(Entering the warehouse from above is trivial, but exiting requires a single entrance, making a stealthy escape difficult if we're exposed.)

(The best approach is to enter quietly and extract Esther without drawing attention. But we need to prepare for the worst.)

Commander: Springfield, we've reached the target location. The terrain here looks risky. Can you arrange for a VTOL drone?

Springfield: A drone... It's difficult, but I'll see what I can do.

Commander: Thank you.

(I finish planning the strategy and start giving orders.)

Commander: Daiyan, you take point. Check the building's entrances and exits, as well as any hidden passageways.

Daiyan: Yes, Commander.

Commander: Jiangyu, stay at this vantage point and monitor the surroundings. Report even the slightest movement.

Jiangyu: Okay!

Commander: Zhao Hui, set up cameras around the perimeter to cover any blind spots Jiangyu might miss, then locate the warehouse's main power switch - it's usually outside.

Zhao Hui: Understood.

Zhao Hui: Jiangyu, seems the Commander doesn't fully trust your surveillance skills, huh?

Jiangyu: Nonsense! The Commander is just thorough. Trust their plans. Now get to work!

Commander: Use code 77 on the communication channel with level 3 encryption. No need to inform me of your Level II communications.

Commander: Begin the operation.

(The Dolls silently and swiftly approach the abandoned warehouse to carry out their tasks.)

(I jump down into the yard and move to a concealed position by the warehouse wall.)

(Surprisingly, there's a lot of noise coming from inside the warehouse, yet there isn't a single guard outside.)

Daiyan: Commander, I've completed the search. There are only two entrances, no hidden doors.

Jiangyu: It's so noisy in there! Are the terrorists having a meeting in the middle of the night?

Zhao Hui: Maybe they're fighting amongst themselves. We might not need to intervene.

Jiangyu: Huh? How could that be?

Commander: Zhao Hui might be right. If Esther is in there with many others, I can guess what she might be planning.

Zhao Hui: Commander, the cameras are set up. I also found the main power switch.

Commander: Good work. Wait for my signal and be ready to cut the power.

Zhao Hui: Understood.

Jiangyu: Ah, Commander, can you give me another task? Just standing here is so boring...

Commander: Surveillance is crucial. Our escape depends on you. Bear with it for now.

Jiangyu: Alright... If you say so, Commander...

Commander: It seems we're ready. Springfield, can you hear me?

Springfield: I'm here, Commander. I've borrowed a police drone from the security department. It's ready for deployment.

Commander: Got it. Thanks for your help.

Commander: Daiyan, I'm coming to your position. Can we sneak in through the back door?

Daiyan: It should be fine. There's no one guarding the back door.

(I move cautiously to Daiyan's location, preparing for the next phase of the operation.)

Commander: I hope this isn't a trap...

(I meet Daiyan at the back door, and she gently pushes it open. She uses her keen hearing to listen inside for a moment, but there is no sound.)

(Daiyan signals to me, and I follow her closely, gun in hand, as we enter the warehouse.)

(We slip inside, and the space is much larger than we expected.)

(The layout is simple, with a massive storage area in the center, a passageway leading to the front and back doors, and stairs connecting the upper floors.)

(The warehouse is not very tall, only three stories, so we decided not to enter the noisy storage area directly. Instead, we climb to the highest floor and quietly look down.)

(At the top, we find a shadowy spot to peek from. What we see takes me by surprise.)

(The abandoned warehouse has a fully set-up stage, with at least dozens gathered below. The person on the stage is speaking into a microphone.)

Daiyan: The one on stage... isn't that Miss Esther?

Commander: Is that Esther? She looks different from the photos.

Daiyan: Yes, she looks much more worn out compared to the photos in the files.

Commander: Such a grand setup, it seems she's ready for one final push.

(I scan the area around the stage. Most people look like workers, but a few stand out.)

Daiyan: Commander...

(Daiyan also notices the odd behavior of some people and points them out to me.)

Commander: You noticed them too...

Daiyan: Yes, their movements look trained. Their eyes and posture are too different from the workers.

Commander: They might be remnants of Girard's faction. It seems they've infiltrated too.

Daiyan: What should we do next?

Commander: Controlling Esther in front of so many people won't be easy. Girard's men must be planning something.

Commander: Let's observe for now and wait for the right moment.

(Daiyan nods and looks at the person on stage.)

(Esther stands on stage, and from above, we can clearly see her anxious expression. She takes several deep breaths, trying to calm herself down.)

(Finally, she makes up her mind, picks up the microphone, and prepares to speak to the noisy audience below.)

(The crowd quiets down gradually as they see she has something to say.)

Esther: I called everyone here today to talk about the detonation plan. I've thought long and hard about this. We have to stop the detonation of Yibo. We can't do this!

(The moment she finishes speaking, the crowd erupts in chaos again.)

Doubtful Local: Boss, you can't be thinking of backing out now?

Angry Local: It's too late to stop now! What are you thinking?!

Doubtful Local: Yeah, we've been waiting for tomorrow. We couldn't even sleep last night!

Esther: Think about how many people will die if we detonate so many bombs during the celebration!

Angry Local: Boss, you're too soft! Think about what the URNC did to us!

Esther: But what does the URNC's actions have to do with ordinary citizens?!

Angry Local: Why should we care? We need to show the URNC what Uzanians are capable of!

Furious Local: Exactly! They need to pay for what they did!

Esther: It's not like that! This whole thing feels wrong! Think about it, haven't we fallen into a trap?

Angry Local: What trap? We get to strike back at those Rossartrist bastards and make a lot of money. Where else can we find a deal like that?

Esther: That's exactly why it's suspicious! Think about where all that money is coming from!

(The crowd starts to murmur, with initial opposition losing some momentum. However, inquisitive voices arise, and someone starts arguing with Esther.)

Doubtful Local: But aren't you the one who started all this, Boss?

Angry Local: Yeah, isn't this just slapping yourself in the face? How can we trust you after this?

Esther: Of course, I know I'm the one who started it. That's why I called everyone here when I discovered the problem!

Esther: This afternoon, someone came and shot me! They knew we had the bombs ready and wanted to silence me! Luckily, I escaped just in time!

(To prove she was attacked, Esther rolls up her sleeve to show the bruises on her arm to the crowd.)

Doubtful Local: Damon and the others never came back after lunch. We heard they were taken by security forces. Did this happen then?

Esther: Exactly! Right after we set up the explosives, the attack happened, and the security forces showed up! It's too much of a coincidence!

Uneasy Local: If Boss got attacked... Damn, is this really a trap...?

(The crowd starts murmuring again. Seeing her words having an effect, Esther prepares to push further.)

(However, a loud and piercing voice from the crowd interrupts her speech.)

Furious Local: Were you bought off by the URNC? You must have sold us out!

Esther: What?

Furious Local: You must have taken the money! How could you, as an Uzanian, speak for the URNC? Do you know how long we've waited to exact our revenge?

Furious Local: You're the one who had us make the bombs, and now you're telling us not to use them! Are you making fools of us?

Esther: Even so, we can't kill people—

Angry Local: They deserve it! The URNC should die, and so should those people!

Furious Local: Exactly! Those collaborators side with the URNC. They deserve to be sacrificed.

Furious Local: We'll use their lives to show the URNC our anger! This is justified revenge! We have every right to do this!

Esther: Are you... are you all insane?

Furious Local: You're the one who's insane!

Furious Local: You started this, and now you want to wash your hands of it? It's not that easy! The URNC destroyed our homeland. We must destroy the URNC!

Angry Local: Yeah! Yeah! Destroy the URNC! Blow them to pieces!

(The crowd erupts into chaos again. Their faces, a mix of anger, disappointment, and hatred, are twisted and grotesque.)

(Seeing these faces, Daiyan can't help but recall her time working in various satellite cities, and even further back, at Griffin... the faces of the humans she interacted with...)

(Commander, Kalina, Helian—those faces in her memory were always gentle and kind. But these people, doing wrong things with such conviction, their malice fills Daiyan's mind, almost paralyzing her thoughts.)

Commander: Daiyan, are you okay?

Daiyan: I'm fine, Commander... It's just a bit overwhelming...

(Daiyan realizes her vulnerability and quickly refocuses to calm herself, but I can still see the sorrow in her expression.)

Daiyan: Why do they hold such malice, willing to harm innocent people to vent their emotions? Uzania itself is in a polluted zone, and the URNC set up mobile quarantine walls to purify their homeland!

Commander: Not everyone can think rationally. For them, the URNC's trains expelled them from their homes, and that's an unforgivable sin.

Daiyan: But wouldn't their homeland be better off purified than polluted?

Commander: The future is too distant for them. They can't care about it, only the present. And the present is that their homeland is gone because of the purification project.

Commander: Moreover, there's always someone inciting the masses, promoting irrationality to them.

(I point to the few loudest people in the crowd, and Daiyan immediately recognizes them as the suspicious individuals we noticed earlier.)

Daiyan: Girard's remnants... are they inciting these workers?

Commander: Esther is trying to persuade her compatriots, but the tide isn't something she can control.

Commander: These people are professionals; it's clear they've done this before. They spread rumors, incite hatred, using these ignorant and pitiful workers as pawns to escape blame.

Commander: Although I dislike the URNC, I detest these worms in the dark even more.

Commander: Like the enemies I've faced before, they tear people apart with hatred, manipulating them with lies and so-called truths, sparking unnecessary conflicts.

Commander: So many lives lost meaninglessly, just pawns in their game. Unforgivable...

(Seeing my furrowed brow, Daiyan gently touches my clenched fist.)

(Realizing my loss of composure, I take a deep breath to calm myself.)

Commander: Ten years have passed, yet the enemies remain the same. Is the world really changing?

Daiyan: That's why we need people like you, Commander.

Commander: Is that really the case...

(I take another deep breath and signal the surrounding units through the communication terminal—we're ready to take action.)

Commander: Be prepared, Daiyan. The time to move is near.

(Daiyan nods at me, and we look down together.)

(The crowd grows more agitated, their calls getting louder. Esther steps back slightly, realizing the situation is slipping out of control.)

AD-1-6 The Ballad of the Homeland

Before Battle

(As if in response to Esther's retreat, the angry crowd rushes onto the stage, grabbing her while she struggles helplessly.)

Esther: What are you doing? Let go of me, you've all gone batshit insane!

Angry Local: Shut up, you Rossartrist dog!

Esther: Ugh...!!! (Coughs)

(Esther continues to try to break free, but one of the people holding her punches her hard in the abdomen, causing intense pain that nearly makes her collapse.)

(The pain causes her body to spasm, making her unable to lift her head.)

(The angry curses and the intense pain leave her dazed, as if she is watching a slow-motion movie scene.)

(She stares at the ground, unable to breathe, until she sees a pair of leather shoes walking closer. She feels her hair being grabbed, her head yanked up sharply.)

???: Esther, you're good at making bombs, but your speech skills are really lacking.

(A man with long hair and a grim expression appears in front of Esther.)

(He looks at Esther with disdain, his words filled with scorn.)

???: I gave you the chance to avenge our homeland, but you chose to be a traitor—to betray us, to turn on the people you grew up with.

Esther: Fl... Flagg! What are you doing here?!

Flagg: Why wouldn't I be here? Is it strange for me to gather with my brothers and sisters?

(Flagg spreads his arms, turning in a circle as if to show off, and the crowd immediately cheers for him.)

Angry Local: Big Brother Flagg knew all along that Esther would betray us!

Furious Local: Thank goodness we have Brother Flagg to guide us! Otherwise, our revenge plan would have been ruined!

Doubtful Local: Brother Flagg! What should we do with this traitor?

(Esther realizes that her fellow countrymen have been completely brainwashed by this man named Flagg, with no one willing to listen to her.)

Daiyan: Commander! That voice... he's the one who shot at me the other day!

Commander: He must be one of the executors behind Girard's operation. Record his face.

Daiyan: Yes, it's recorded clearly.

Commander: Zhao Hui, be ready to cut the power. Daiyan, once the lights go out, extract Esther from the warehouse. We'll meet at the back door.

Zhao Hui: Understood.

Daiyan: Yes, Commander.

Flagg: Since you chose to be a traitor, be prepared to pay the price. It's a pity, I thought we were all warriors filled with anger...

Esther: What, you're going to kill me here?

Esther: Even if you kill me, my countrymen will hand all the evidence to the security forces. You won't succeed!

Flagg: Are you sure anyone will help you? Stop deceiving yourself, Esther.

Flagg: I gave you the chance to be a person, but you chose to be a dog—a dog of the Rossartrists. You're not the chosen one, you're just a speck of dust, a piece of debris.

Flagg: Farewell, Esther.

(Flagg raises a gun towards Esther, and the warehouse falls silent, everyone holding their breath for the moment of execution.)

(I judge that the moment is right.)

Commander: Zhao Hui, cut the power.

Flagg: What?

(With a click, the warehouse plunges into darkness, throwing the crowd into chaos.)

(In the darkness, Flagg immediately jumps off the stage, hiding among the crowd. The workers holding Esther loosen their grip in panic.)

(Esther seizes the opportunity, kicking away the worker beside her and breaking free, running toward the back door.)

Esther: Now's my chance...!

(At that moment, Daiyan jumps down from above, landing right in front of Esther.)

(Esther freezes in shock.)

Esther: You! You're the one from last night—

Daiyan: I'm sorry, Miss Esther.

(Daiyan strikes Esther on the back of her neck, knocking her out.)

(Daiyan hoists Esther over her shoulder and runs towards the back door, where I meet her after descending the stairs.)

Daiyan: Commander, Miss Esther is secured.

Commander: Good, let's leave immediately.

Commander: Jiangyu, how's the situation outside?

(At this moment, the lights suddenly come back on, making me squint. I realize the situation has changed.)

Commander: Tch... faster than I expected.

Zhao Hui: Commander, they used a backup power source. Should I cut the power again?

Commander: The risk is too high. Join us at the back door immediately.

Zhao Hui: Understood.

(With the lights back on, the crowd notices Esther is no longer on stage.)

(Esther's disappearance infuriated them, launching into a search for her.)

Doubtful Local: Where's Esther? She escaped!

Furious Local: She can't have gone far! Find her!!!

Jiangyu: Commander, it's bad! Lots of people are rushing outside looking for you! What should I do?

Commander: Can you create a distraction to lead them away?

Jiangyu: Oh, okay, I'll try!

Commander: Springfield! We need drone extraction now! The extraction point is... Zhao Hui, find us a suitable landing spot!

Zhao Hui: Right away.

Springfield: Commander, the drone is on its way to you, ETA 3 minutes.

Jiangyu: Commander! What's with these people, are they crazy? They're actually fighting me!

Commander: What?

(I check the communicator and see Jiangyu jumping into the crowd, taunting loudly and subduing those who rush at her.)

(Even so, the enraged crowd keeps attacking her, forcing Jiangyu to retreat continuously.)

Furious Local: Damn tin can, are you Esther's bodyguard?!

Angry Local: Throw her and Esther into the trash heap!!!

Jiangyu: You think you can take me down? Think again!

Daiyan: Jiangyu! Be careful!

Jiangyu: Don't worry, Sis, this is nothing I can't handle!

During Battle

Commander: We need to support Jiangyu. Hack the defensive machines hidden in the crowd and disable them.

Daiyan: Yes, Commander!

After Battle

Springfield: Commander, the drone has landed at Zhao Hui's designated coordinates. Evacuate now!

Commander: Understood. Everyone, board the drone. Zhao Hui, you pilot!

Zhao Hui: Got it.

(The drone hovers above them, shakily descending, but Jiangyu is still far away, and the nearby workers have already heard the sound.)

Doubtful Local: Over here! The drone is landing here! Forget about that tin can, Esther is escaping!

(The crowd immediately turns towards the drone's position. Although it has landed, Jiangyu hasn't made it back yet.)

Jiangyu: These people are relentless! Commander, you go ahead. I'll find a way to catch up!

Daiyan: Jiangyu!

Commander: No, we evacuate together!

(The crowd is nearly upon us. If this continues, they'll pin us down.)

(Daiyan, carrying the unconscious Esther, climbs into the drone. Zhao Hui and I brace at the hatch, watching the crowd close in. Zhao Hui unconsciously flicks off the safety of her weapon and looks at me. I shake my head.)

Daiyan: Commander, take off now! Jiangyu, head upstairs!

Commander: Alright! Zhao Hui, go!

(We all understand Daiyan's plan immediately. Zhao Hui lifts the drone.)

(Just as the crowd reaches them, the drone ascends rapidly. The strong wind from the takeoff topples several people in front.)

Jiangyu: Sis, catch me!

(Climbing three stories is easy for Jiangyu. She jumps up, grabs the second-floor railing, and with another powerful leap, propels herself onto the warehouse roof.)

(As the drone flies past her, she leaps into the cabin, landing right in Daiyan's arms.)

Daiyan: Whoa!

(Daiyan, prepared to catch Jiangyu, is still startled by her leap. Once she's sure Jiangyu is safe, she helps her to a seat.)

Jiangyu: Whew... That was a close one. Just in time.

Zhao Hui: Good catch, Daiyan.

Daiyan: That was too risky, Jiangyu! Don't do that again!

Jiangyu: It was for the Commander's mission~

Daiyan: You can complete the mission safely!

Jiangyu: Yes, yes, we'll discuss it next time.

(Noticing Daiyan is about to start lecturing, Jiangyu quickly hides behind me, making faces at Daiyan.)

(I can only shake my head helplessly and then connect with Springfield.)

Commander: Springfield, we've secured the target. Everyone is accounted for. Returning now.

Springfield: Good job, Commander. Awaiting your return.

Commander: Zhao Hui, let's head back.

Zhao Hui: Yes.

(The drone banks swiftly and departs from the warehouse area.)

(Behind the agitated crowd, Flagg gestures to several people to lower their guns. They respectfully put away their weapons.)

(Watching the drone's flight path, Flagg pulls out a communication terminal, and dials a number.)

Flagg: I have something to tell you. I saw someone at CHE-02.

Flagg: Though it was from a distance, that figure...

(Flagg pulls out a cigarette, and his subordinate lights it for him.)

(He takes a deep drag, pauses theatrically, and continues when the person on the other end starts to get impatient.)

Flagg: I'm not mistaken. It's the one who disappeared ten years ago.

Flagg: Looks like we've caught a big fish. Wait for my good news.

Flagg: Heh, mark my words, I won't let the group down.

(...)

(Esther slowly opens her eyes, sunlight filtering through the tree canopy, casting dappled patterns on her face. She raises a hand to shield her eyes from the sun, trying to sit up.)

???: Are you awake?

(A gentle woman strokes her forehead, a profound sense of peace enveloping Esther like a warm blanket. The woman picks a flower from beside her and places it in Esther's hair, the fragrance filling the air.)

(Esther takes the flower from her hair and finds it's a white potato flower.)

???: Esther, you must live well.

(The woman stands up and walks away into the distance, her figure so blurry that Esther can hardly see her. But Esther knows exactly who she is.)

Esther: Mom? Please wait!

(The woman does not respond to Esther's call, only walking further away, as if stepping into a blank world.)

(Esther tries to reach out but finds she cannot get up no matter how hard she tries.)

Esther: Mom, don't leave me! Please, Mom— Mom!

(Esther wakes up suddenly, the pain in her body causing a wave of dizziness.)

(She looks around at the unfamiliar place. A warm, gentle feeling on her head—someone is sitting by her bed, stroking her hair.)

Esther: Where is this...

Daiyan: Are you awake, Miss Esther?

(At Esther's bedside is Daiyan, humming a melody that Esther knows very well.)

(Seeing Esther awake, Daiyan adjusts her posture so Esther can see her clearly.)

Esther: You... you're the one playing the guzheng at the restaurant...

Esther: Ah! It was you who knocked me out just now! And last night you were tailing me!

(Panicking, Esther tries to jump up from the bed. However, her senses haven't fully returned, and she cannot support herself. Daiyan quickly helps her sit back up.)

Daiyan: I'm sorry, it was an emergency, and I had to cause you some harm. Do you feel any discomfort now?

Esther: ...

(Esther does not answer Daiyan's question. Hearing the commotion, I knock on the door. After getting Daiyan's permission, I enter the room.)

(Esther looks at Daiyan and me with caution, saying nothing.)

Commander: She's awake?

Daiyan: Yes, Miss Esther just woke up.

Commander: How are you feeling?

(Ignoring my greeting, Esther continues to stare at the bed, saying nothing.)

Daiyan: Miss Esther might still be confused...

Commander: It's understandable, given the circumstances, but we have limited time...

(Daiyan examines Esther's face worriedly. Although Esther tries to suppress her emotions and appear expressionless, tears stream uncontrollably from her eyes.)

Daiyan: Are you crying?

(Esther pulls up the bedsheet to wipe her tears, but they keep flowing. The falling tears soak the sheet beneath her, yet she remains stubbornly silent.)

(Daiyan looks at me questioningly. I understand what she wants to do. After a brief thought, I nod in agreement.)

(Daiyan turns to the silent Esther, clears her throat, and begins to speak.)

Daiyan: "I bring water from deep underground, pouring it spoonful by spoonful onto the black soil, waiting for the delicate shoots to break through..."

(Esther suddenly looks up, her eyes filled with disbelief as she stares at Daiyan.)

Daiyan: "...You said, when the potato flowers bloom, you will return..."

Esther: My notebook!

(Daiyan takes out a delicate notebook from her coat, and Esther immediately gets excited upon seeing it.)

Esther: That's my notebook, give it back!

Commander: We can return it to you, but we need to ask you some questions first. As long as you—

Daiyan: Ahem.

(Daiyan rarely interrupts me, but she does now, shaking her head. Realizing my approach was inappropriate, I step back and remain silent.)

Daiyan: Miss Esther, this is the notebook you dropped when we were attacked this afternoon. Fortunately, I found it and kept it safe.

Daiyan: This notebook holds great significance for you, doesn't it?

Esther: What do you want?

Daiyan: Since it's very important to you, it should be returned to its rightful owner.

(Daiyan extends the notebook to Esther. Esther looks incredulous and doesn't reach out to take it.)

Esther: You're... just giving it back to me?

Daiyan: Yes, Miss Esther.

(Only then does Esther snatch the notebook and hold it tightly against her chest. The relief of having it back brings some color back to her face.)

(She immediately opens the notebook and sees the yellowed photograph still inside. Unable to suppress her emotions any longer, she clutches the blanket and sobs.)

Esther: Mom... Mom, I thought I'd never see you again...

(Tears stream down Esther's face as she looks at the photograph, her sleeve becoming soaked as she desperately tries to wipe them away, unable to stop crying.)

Esther: Why, why did it turn out this way?! I never wanted to do terrible things! I just wanted to return to Uzania alive!

(Esther grips the blanket with all her might, trying to vent all her grievances and frustrations.)

Esther: I'm scared too... but I'm the only one who can stand up!

Esther: We can't return home carrying the souls of innocent people! Why can't they understand that?!

(She looks at the yellowed photo, as if seeking answers to save herself.)

Esther: Mom... what should I do... what should I do...

(Daiyan gently pats Esther's back and uses a tissue to wipe away her tears. After a long time, Esther's sobs turn into sniffles, and she finally gains control over her emotions.)

(Daiyan and I remain silent, waiting for Esther to speak when she is ready.)

(Her breathing gradually steadies. She looks at us, wanting to speak but hesitant. Her gaze shifts between us and her notebook before she finally settles on the notebook.)

Esther: Did you... did you read my notebook?

Daiyan: I'm sorry, we did look through it. Inside, we saw many words crossed out repeatedly—"revenge plan", "gunpowder", "detonation points"...

Esther: ...

Daiyan: Your actions and words in the warehouse earlier... your true intentions contrast sharply with the "evil thoughts" in the notebook.

Daiyan: Words, like painting and music, reflect the creator's state of mind. Those repeated erasures show you don't agree with the "revenge plan", right?

Esther: Of course, I don't agree... How could I ever agree?!

(Esther looks at the photo again, her gaze softening as she strokes it.)

Daiyan: The woman in the photo, is she your mother?

Esther: Yes.

Daiyan: Is she in this city too?

Esther: She's dead.

Daiyan: ...I'm sorry for your loss.

(Esther takes a deep breath and finally musters the courage to look directly at Daiyan and me.)

Esther: The woman in the photo is my mother.

Esther: The first half of the notebook contains my mother's essays. She grew up in Uzania, met my father there, and gave birth to me.

Esther: Uzania is my homeland, its full name is Uzamadeki. That desolate place originally didn't even have a name; it was my elders who developed it and named it.

Esther: In my memory, my homeland is like a tear in the desert, always with white potato flowers swaying in the wind.

Esther: The smell I'm most familiar with is the aroma of baked potatoes. Everything from my childhood is there.

Daiyan: But because of the advance of the purification zone, you and your fellow countrymen later had to leave Uzania, right?

Esther: Hah... If it weren't for the URNC forcing us, who would willingly leave their homeland?

Esther: Our elders spent decades developing that place. Even when the environment worsened, people still wished to remain.

Esther: But then the Great Wall trains came... those steel monsters destroyed our farmland, our houses, our homeland!

Esther: The URNC promised we could live in the Green Zone cities, but most of us had radiation levels too high to qualify for the satellite city!

Esther: We originally had several hundred people, but in the end, less than a hundred of us made it into this satellite city!

Esther: As for the others, where did they go? I don't know, and I can't find out.

Daiyan: ...I'm sorry to bring up such painful memories.

Esther: ...I've kept these thoughts inside for a long time.

Esther: I was lucky; my mother was one of those few who made it into the city.

Esther: We barely managed to settle down. Small spaces? Strict surveillance?

Esther: It didn't matter, as long as my mother was there, as long as my fellow countrymen were there, I could endure.

Esther: We busied ourselves in the city, smiling, living at the mercy of the city folks.

Esther: To them, we were no different from Dolls, maybe even less useful...

Esther: But we had to live on, with dignity. We formed a work team made up of our countrymen and started our own business.

Esther: Later, due to my skills, I was elected to lead the team. Slowly, our business improved, and we could finally eat better.

Esther: But in the endless days of work, my mother's health deteriorated, and she died from radiation sickness.

Esther: That was the last straw for me.

(Esther grits her teeth, clutching the bed sheet into a ball.)

Esther: Then that guy... that Flagg found me.

Esther: He claimed to be from Uzania too, and he told me many despicable things the URNC had done. In my anger, I agreed to his plan.

Esther: He promised a large sum of money once it was done.

Esther: I didn't think much at the time and gathered my countrymen to plan the bombings during the celebration.

Esther: But the more I thought about it, the more wrong it felt.

Esther: He claimed to be from Uzania, but no one I knew had ever heard of him. Besides, no Uzanian could source so much explosives and money.

Esther: So, I tried to stop the plan. But as soon as I started, Flagg showed up again, this time to kill me.

Esther: I intended to escape to our old secret refuge and get my people to help stop the bombing.

Esther: But you saw what happened, Flagg's people had already infiltrated. I couldn't stop them from bombing during the celebration.

Esther: You know the rest. My countrymen have been completely blinded by hatred. Nothing I said mattered anymore.

Esther: And then... you brought me here.

(Esther finishes her story, looking at me with a complex expression.)

Esther: It was your idea to rescue me, wasn't it? This Doll is under your command?

(Esther points to Daiyan.)

Esther: I heard her call you Commander.

Commander: You could say that. You can call me Commander, and her... just call her Daiyan.

(Esther looks at Daiyan, who nods and smiles at her.)

Esther: Commander... and Daiyan.

(Esther mutters their names a few times, then looks up at the Commander with a question.)

Esther: You're not with Flagg, are you?

Commander: What do you think?

Esther: Definitely not, otherwise I'd already be dead. But you don't look like security forces either...

Commander: We're just concerned citizens who saw you in danger and decided to help.

Esther: Don't lie to me. What kind of concerned citizens have Tactical Dolls?

Commander: Well, it's not unheard of. Engineers build bombs, too.

(Hearing the word "bomb," Esther's expression changes, realizing her fault, and she stays silent.)

Commander: Jokes aside, we just want to understand what you mentioned about Flagg and any information related to him. If you tell us everything you know, we can ensure your safety.

Esther: If you're not with the security forces, why did you save me? Do you have an ulterior motive?

Commander: I'm just an ordinary bounty hunter. I'm involved because Flagg's organization is plotting something big, and I've been hired to investigate these cases.

Esther: A bounty hunter?

Commander: That's right, just an ordinary bounty hunter. As for why we saved you, let's just say... we can't stand it.

Esther: What... do you mean?

Commander: I can't stand their schemes. You were used by them—you and your fellow countrymen.

Commander: They exploited your hatred for the URNC for ill-gotten gains, using your hands to disrupt the hard-earned peace. Inciting hatred is the easiest way to manipulate people.

Commander: By igniting the fire of evil in your hearts, they manipulate you to unknowingly do their bidding.

Esther: But the URNC DID destroy our homeland. Those officials drove us out of our homes! We couldn't do anything but watch as our homeland was bulldozed!

Esther: If the URNC truly meant to change the world as they claimed, why should ordinary people like us bear the cost?

Commander: That's because...

(I am momentarily at a loss for words, unable to find any justification for the URNC. I once wanted to change things, but I never succeeded.)

(Can I really lecture this woman when I haven't accomplished anything myself?)

Esther: But... even so, I don't want to see other innocent people die because of our so-called revenge.

Esther: Taking away others' happiness... How would that make us any different from the URNC?

Daiyan: If only everyone could calm down like you. I believe hatred only begets more hatred.

Daiyan: To overcome past hardships, we need to find better ways to change the world. Isn't that right, Commander?

(Daiyan looks at me earnestly. I know her words are not just for Esther. Looking into her eyes, I offer a bittersweet smile.)

Commander: Yes... even if we've lost everything, as long as we're alive, we can start anew.

Esther: I want to live too... but whether I tried to sabotage the bombs or mobilize my countrymen, I failed.

Esther: I even tried to report to the authorities, but the security forces ignored me. I suspect Flagg has already bought them off.

Commander: The organization behind Flagg is too powerful for the security forces to act against them.

Commander: But someone has to stand up to them, just as you did despite the danger.

Esther: Just like me...

(Esther thinks for a moment, her gaze becoming more resolute.)

Esther: You want to stop Flagg and prevent the bombings at the celebration, right?

Commander: Yes, and ideally capture him.

Esther: I don't think I can escape the law's punishment, but at least I want to prevent my countrymen from committing unforgivable crimes.

Esther: I can tell you everything I know. Can you help me stop Flagg's plan?

Commander: If you're willing to help us—but I don't need to stress the dangers involved.

Esther: I'm not afraid of danger! I can't just stay here.

Esther: Please, take me with you. I'm the only one who knows the exact locations and deployment of the bombs!

(Daiyan and I exchange a glance, understanding that we've both come to trust Esther. Daiyan helps Esther out of bed.)

Commander: Let's get moving, Esther. We don't have much time.

AM-1-2 Discordant Fuse

(On the day of the celebration, the sky begins to darken, and the bells chime as the grand event approaches its climax.)

(Crowds line the streets, eager to catch a glimpse of Yibo, while lights flicker on one by one, accompanied by distant cheers and laughter.)

Child: Mom! When is Yibo coming out?

Young Mother: Soon. After this parade ends and the fireworks show, it'll be Yibo's turn!

Child: Mom, I want to go to the front! I want to see Yibo!

Young Mother: Don't run off!

(The playful child ignores his mother's warning and squeezes through the crowd toward the parade, weaving between people's legs. Suddenly, a passerby trips him, and he is about to fall.)

Daiyan: Careful, little one.

(Daiyan catches the child before he falls. Although the child doesn't hit the ground, his legs give way, and he sits on a passing Dinergate.)

(The Dinergate topples over, spilling rainbow strips all over the child, who immediately starts crying.)

Sharkry: Ahhh! My Dinergate flipped over again!

(Hearing the commotion behind her, Sharkry rushes over. She was about to scold, but upon seeing the crying child, she quickly changed her attitude, flashing her signature idol smile.)

Sharkry: Don't cry, don't cry. Sharkry will give you a fluffy toy to keep you company, okay? ♥

(Sharkry's mechanical arm produces a fluffy toy as if by magic, and she hands it to the child.)

(The child takes the toy and immediately forgets his scare, smiling brightly.)

(Daiyan returns the child to his mother, who thanks them before leaving, with the child waving goodbye to Sharkry.)

Daiyan: Miss Sharkry, you're really good at handling people.

Sharkry: Of course! Caring for people's feelings is an idol's essential skill! ♥

Sharkry: To earn everyone's love, Sharkry practices and learns diligently every day! ♥

Jiangyu: Lantern girl, you switch faces so fast! When I broke the Dinergate, you didn't act like this at all!

Sharkry: Hmph, that's because you were so rude. Sharkry doesn't like impolite people.

Jiangyu: What?! You were the one who overcharged me in the first place!

Zhao Hui: Jiangyu, don't get distracted. Focus on your task.

Jiangyu: Ugh... Sis, can't you at least back me up a little?

Daiyan: Ahem... Jiangyu, have you found a good surveillance point?

Jiangyu: Huh? Oh, yeah, we found a spot on a high-rise commercial street. Its balcony overlooks the main celebration area—perfect for surveillance.

Zhao Hui: We're setting up the equipment and have sent the coordinates to the Commander.

Daiyan: Understood. Make sure to protect the Commander.

Jiangyu: Leave it to me!

Daiyan: Miss Sharkry, can I leave the stage to you?

Sharkry: Sharkry is a seasoned idol. Attracting guests is what I do best. Just wait and see~!

(Daiyan returns to the stage and looks out. The streets are festively decorated, stalls are set up along the roads, and countless people are enjoying the festivities.)

(Her communication terminal beeps, and she quickly answers.)

Commander: Daiyan, how's the situation in your area?

Daiyan: I've checked in with Miss Sharkry. The last Yibo Esther mentioned is near the stage.

Daiyan: We've removed the explosives from Yibo and left the detonation system as bait, ready to proceed as planned.

Commander: Got it. Let's hope Esther's plan works. It's been a tough afternoon, but we can't relax just yet.

Daiyan: Understood, Commander. We will complete the mission. Any updates from Miss Springfield?

Commander: Springfield reported that the security forces have arrested most of Esther's countrymen based on her information.

Commander: Apart from the Yibos you dealt with, they've also handled the remaining ones with explosives. But...

Daiyan: But...?

Commander: The amount of explosives removed from Yibo doesn't match what we previously estimated.

Commander: Moreover, several members of Esther's engineering team are still at large, and Flagg hasn't made any new moves.

Daiyan: Could they be preparing something else?

Commander: I suspect they'll disguise themselves and blend into the crowd during the celebration, then attempt to detonate the bombs.

Commander: Esther mentioned they're experts at infiltration. The security forces haven't found them after a whole day.

Commander: I think those people are following Flagg's orders. Regular workers wouldn't have such strong counter-surveillance skills.

Daiyan: So, we'll have to rely on Esther's plan to find them.

Commander: Yes. The Yibo near you is the largest in the parade, and we've even deactivated the surrounding defense mechanisms to lure them out.

Commander: I believe Flagg won't miss this chance to use the largest Yibo to create an explosion.

Daiyan: Do you think he'll realize it's a trap?

Commander: Even if he does, he'll still send the Uzanian people to take the risk. He has no reason not to.

Daiyan: Understood. We'll execute the plan as soon as possible.

(I end the call and see Springfield busy communicating with the security forces.)

(I look at Esther, who is anxiously gazing out the window, rubbing her hands together in an attempt to calm herself.)

Commander: Esther, are you alright?

Esther: ...Not really.

Commander: I know it must be hard hearing about your countrymen being arrested...

Esther: I'm not worried about them. They're actually safer in custody... I'm worried about those we haven't found yet...

Esther: They are the most skilled members of our team, and if they are swayed by Flagg to do something unforgivable...

Commander: Don't worry. Your plan will work.

Esther: I have confidence in my plan, but Flagg... I'm worried he'll interfere.

Commander: Flagg, huh... We know too little about him.

(At this moment, Springfield finishes her call and pulls up a chair to sit at the table with Esther and me.)

(As I flip through the documents in front of me, I press my temples and ask Springfield.)

Commander: Can we gather more information about Flagg?

Springfield: What you have in front of you is everything we have, Commander.

Commander: Real name unknown, personal details unknown. We only know he served in the military, and after his unit was disbanded, he joined a private military contractor.

Commander: After joining the Girard Group, Flagg worked as a PR manager for a subsidiary, then quickly resigned.

Commander: Esther, do you know anything about him?

Esther: I've only met him a few times, but I can tell he's very cautious and extremely ruthless.

Commander: I see... It's typical for someone like him.

Commander: But we still have too little information to understand his behavior fully.

Springfield: The security department has only been able to provide this much. I'm trying to find out more through other channels.

Commander: Keep me updated with any new information.

Commander: What's the situation on the ground?

Springfield: I've coordinated with the security department. They will make arrests as soon as they identify anyone connected to Flagg.

Springfield: To prevent explosions, they'll simultaneously evacuate the corresponding areas. Also, news control will be elevated to level three to prevent panic.

Commander: Do they plan to cancel the celebration?

Springfield: The city leaders still want the celebration to continue as long as the situation remains under control.

Esther: Damn URNC, risking the citizens' lives for their reputation!

Commander: Canceling the celebration would have severe repercussions, which would be a victory for Girard's remnants.

Esther: So what? Is that more important than people's lives?

Commander: My intelligence suggests that Girard's strategy is to create chaos and fear, but I also suspect they have new backers.

Commander: If they can remove officials targeted by public anger and insert new ones, their backers can gradually control the city's administration.

Commander: So, whether it's through explosions or canceling the celebration, the result for them is the same.

Esther: What...

Commander: Once the incident occurs, their media will flood with news criticizing the URNC. It would be light punishment for a few officials to step down.

Commander: Outwardly, Uzanian will be blamed, and both citizens and the URNC officials will direct their anger at the Uzanian people. The backers will profit from the chaos.

Commander: If they gain control of the city, the impact will be far more significant than a few dozen people.

Esther: Damn...! Those bastards!

Springfield: Don't worry too much, Miss Esther. We won't let them succeed.

Commander: As long as your plan works, whether it's stopping the explosions or capturing Flagg, I believe we can handle it.

Esther: I... I understand, I'll give it my all.

(Esther clenches her fists tightly, asking me with a nervous tone.)

Esther: Commander, you don't seem like an ordinary bounty hunter?

Commander: Why do you think that?

Esther: An ordinary bounty hunter wouldn't plan so thoroughly or be able to mobilize the security department.

Commander: Don't think too much about it, Esther. What matters is that we both want to correct the mistakes of the past.

Commander: Trust me.

(I pat Esther's shoulder, hoping to encourage her. She nods, somewhat understanding.)

Commander: Alright, get ready. We're heading out.

Esther: Daiyan, I brought your guzheng. It's really heavy.

Daiyan: Thank you, Miss Esther. It was inconvenient to carry it while chasing after Yibo earlier. Just leave it here.

(Esther carefully places the guzheng case down, amazed at the strength disparity between humans and Dolls.)

Esther: Once the Commander is in position, we'll start the performance. I'm counting on you.

Daiyan: It's my duty. And I hope you'll find the courage to face this, Miss Esther.

Esther: I will.

(Esther nods to Daiyan, recalling the conversations she had with the Dolls at the Zuccherò Café earlier.)

Springfield: Is Miss Esther alright?

Esther: Who is this?

Commander: This is the owner of this café. You can call her Springfield.

Esther: Miss Springfield... hello...

Springfield: No need to be so formal, just call me Springfield. How is the situation?

Commander: Esther has told us everything. She wants to join our operation.

Springfield: Miss Esther, you want to join us?

Esther: Um... does Miss Springfield know what we're planning?

Commander: Springfield is well-acquainted with the security department and coordinated the previous operations.

Esther: Then I won't explain the earlier part. I know the revenge plan for the celebration inside out. I can be very useful.

Springfield: Can you tell us more about this revenge plan?

Esther: We've planted over a hundred explosives at various celebration facilities.

Daiyan: That many?

Esther: Most of the explosives are minimal, meant more for demonstration than actual damage.

Springfield: That's a relief. The damage done will be minimal.

Esther: But there are some places with many explosives. If they detonate, they could destroy an entire block.

Commander: What? Where are those bombs?

Esther: In the Yibos... I hid the high-yield explosives inside the Yibos.

Commander: Yibos? What are those?

Daiyan: They are models of the city's mythical creatures, participating in the parade...

Daiyan: If a Yibo explodes during the celebration, it would be disastrous...

Commander: We need to act. Springfield, contact the security department. We can't handle so many explosives alone; we need their cooperation.

Daiyan: Commander, I'm worried... Now that Miss Esther is with us, will they change their original plan?

Commander: Good point. If it were me, I wouldn't just wait around to be captured either.

Esther: Exactly... Flagg is cunning; he will change the bomb locations. But the celebration facilities are limited, so their new options aren't many.

Esther: Also, the Yibos' detonation mechanism is my design. I set a unique trigger method only known to me and a few of my countrymen.

Commander: But your countrymen seem to be on Flagg's side.

Esther: Most of them aren't deeply involved. But a few of my closest associates are well-versed in my setups and can handle the bombs themselves.

Commander: Flagg will likely rely heavily on them.

Esther: I understand that, so I have an idea.

Daiyan: What idea?

Esther: The tune you were humming earlier, and the one you played in the café... where did you learn it?

Daiyan: I heard it from a traveler during my journeys. He told me it was a common tune among the people from a certain place.

Esther: By chance... or perhaps fate.

Esther: That song is called “When the Potato Flowers Bloom,” a melody almost everyone from Uzamadeki knows. I grew up hearing my mother sing it.

Commander: You’re thinking...

Esther: Can we use the stage near Yibo?

Commander: Springfield?

Springfield: I can arrange it with the security department. It shouldn’t be a problem.

Esther: That's great. To trigger the explosives, they'll have to return near the Yibos.

Esther: Miss Daiyan, if you play that tune, anyone from Uzania will react. You can use this to identify my countrymen and prevent them from detonating the bombs.

Commander: It can work as a backup plan. Daiyan, can you perform on stage?

Daiyan: Gladly, Commander.

Springfield: I’ll contact the security department now. Miss Esther, please write down all the information about your countrymen and the bomb locations.

Esther: I’ll do it right away.

(The celebration bells bring Esther back to the present.)

(Daiyan has set up the guzheng, checking the tuning, and places her fingers on the strings.)

(Esther, after some thought, takes out her precious notebook. She looks at the yellowed photo, turns it over, and removes the flower behind it.)

(She holds the flower out to Daiyan, who is momentarily taken aback.)

Daiyan: Miss Esther... this is...

Esther: This is a potato flower specimen. My mother made it for me. Please accept it as a gift.

Daiyan: A gift?

Esther: You saved my life, and not just once, but twice. Uzanians don't remain indifferent to their saviors. But right now, I have nothing left. All I can give you is this potato flower to express my gratitude.

(Esther bows solemnly to Daiyan, who quickly stands up and takes the white flower from Esther's hands.)

Esther: Flagg has tried to assassinate me several times already. He'll definitely make a move during the performance.

Esther: But I don't want to back down. I want my fellow countrymen to know my thoughts. I don't want to have any regrets.

Esther: Even if something happens, please prioritize stopping my countrymen from detonating the explosives. I don't want the Uzania name to be stained...

Daiyan: Don't worry, Miss Esther. We will definitely stop Flagg's conspiracy, and we will protect you.

Esther: I hope so.

(Seeing Daiyan accept the white flower, Esther turns away and says nothing more. Daiyan, holding the flower, feels a bit at a loss.)

(Suddenly, she remembers the small glass bottle pendant she bought earlier. She takes it out and carefully places the potato flower inside the bottle.)

(Under the light, the glass bottle reflects a mottled glow, illuminating the potato flower inside into a pure white translucence.)

(Looking at the small flower in the glass bottle, Daiyan suddenly feels a wave of inspiration washing over her.)

(She glances at the guzheng, deciding to fully express her emotions through her performance.)

Commander: This should be the place, right?

(It takes me a while to reach the destination marked by Jiangyu. Upon arrival, I saw the law enforcement department's autonomous machines lying all over the ground.)

(Seeing me approach, Jiangyu rushes over before I can speak and quickly explains.)

Jiangyu: Commander, it's not what it looks like! These law enforcement defense machines were already broken. As soon as we got here, they activated their weapons and charged at us. We had to defend ourselves!

Commander: I haven't even said anything yet...

(I turn my gaze to Zhao Hui, who nods at me, indicating that Jiangyu's words are true.)

Zhao Hui: These machines suddenly attacked us as soon as they got close. Fortunately, the fireworks outside covered the gunshots, preventing a panic.

Commander: Law enforcement machines... That is highly unlikely.

Commander: Next time, don't act so recklessly. Quickly set up the cameras and surveillance equipment. It's almost time to act.

(Jiangyu and Zhao Hui nod and begin setting up the equipment on the balcony.)

(Still uneasy, I connect with Springfield via communicator.)

Commander: Springfield, something's not right. The law enforcement defense machines have been hacked. Without military equipment, it could only be done through internal circuits.

Springfield: Are you saying there's a Girard remnant insider within the law enforcement department?

Commander: It's possible. Their electronic warfare skills are likely quite advanced. They won't be easy to deal with.

Springfield: I'll maintain caution when communicating with the law enforcement department. Should we change our plan?

Commander: No, we have our contingencies.

Springfield: Alright, I'm standing by for orders.

Commander: Okay, now we wait for Daiyan to get ready...

(Leaning against the balcony railing, the unique scent of the satellite city blow against my face.)

(Looking at the bustling streets below, I can't help but feel a bit nostalgic.)

Commander: It's such a lively scene. It's been a while since I've seen something like this.

Springfield: For this celebration, CHE-02 specifically granted a five-day holiday. Both locals and visitors have been eagerly anticipating it for a long time.

Springfield: This satellite city has been under construction for many years and is finally starting to prosper.

Commander: But some people want to destroy this prosperity...

Springfield: Commander, compared to before, you've changed somewhat.

Commander: Why do you say that?

Springfield: The old Commander would have said something like, "This is false prosperity."

Commander: Really...? That does sound like me...

(I reminisce, acknowledging with a self-deprecating smile.)

Commander: But even false prosperity is still prosperity. I won't allow anyone to steal this moment of solace.

Commander: I've failed to save too many people... I've always had to make difficult choices.

Springfield: Commander...

Commander: So this time, I don't want to leave anyone behind.

Springfield: ...Commander, don't dwell on the past. Focus on the present.

Commander: Mm...

Daiyan: Commander, we're ready. Can we start the performance?

Commander: Hold on...

(I turn around and see Jiangyu and Zhao Hui giving me a thumbs-up, indicating everything was prepared.)

Commander: We're ready too. Let's begin!

(As Daiyan sits at the guzheng, pedestrians around the stage are captivated by her beauty and demeanor, stopping in their tracks.)

Passerby: Is this an impromptu performance? It's not on the schedule.

Sharkry: Don't miss out, folks! The top-tier folk music performance is about to start, the highlight before the Yibo Parade. You don't want to miss this!

(Sharkry enthusiastically draws in passersby by the stage, while the Dinergates strike various poses, making the crowd laugh.)

Passerby: There's still some time before the parade. Should we watch?

Passerby: Sure, the girl on stage looks so pretty. Is she a Doll?

Passerby: Can't tell, but who cares? There's a show to watch.

(Seeing the crowd gather, I check the time and activate the communicator.)

Commander: The performance on stage will start in 30 seconds. How's it going with law enforcement?

Springfield: All cameras are equipped with facial recognition, and plainclothes officers are mingling in the crowd.

Commander: Understood. Jiangyu, Zhao Hui, once the cameras spot any suspects, use the observation equipment to keep a close eye on them. Confirm the target and guide the plainclothes officers to apprehend them.

Jiangyu: Got it!

Zhao Hui: Don't worry. Even if the suspect is a mouse, I'll find them.

Commander: Alright, let's hope everything goes smoothly.

(Hearing the communication in her earpiece, Esther nervously swallows. She looked at Daiyan and notices a hint of tranquility on her face.)

((Daiyan begins plucking the guzheng's strings impeccably, and the familiar melody starts to resonate from the stage.))

(The melodious guzheng music, played brilliantly by Daiyan, attracted more and more people to stay.)

Esther notices that Daiyan has made some adaptations to the original melody, enriching the music's emotions.)

(The graceful and winding guzheng tune flows like water. The adapted piece seems to convey not only "homesickness" but also a story whispered in one's ear, with elements of "longing", "hope", and an indescribable melancholy.)

Passerby: This performance...it's lovely.

Passerby: But in the melody... isn't there a hint of sorrow?

(Meanwhile, at the nearby observation point, Jiangyu and Zhao Hui quietly listen to the guzheng music from the stage.)

Zhao Hui: Looks like Daiyan has started the operation.

Jiangyu: Sis's music is so beautiful. What's that saying? Ah... "Lingering sound around the beams"! That phrase fits perfectly!

Zhao Hui: Didn't expect you to remember such a phrase with your intellect.

Jiangyu: Hey, I'm cultured, okay?! Hmph, that's just your shallow prejudice!

Springfield: Jiangyu, Zhao Hui, the cameras have spotted the suspects. I'm synchronizing the footage with you. Keep monitoring them and mark their positions.

Jiangyu: Got it!

(Jiangyu sees the camera footage. Several people in the crowd glance towards the performance after Daiyan starts playing, but quickly turn away, pretending not to listen.)

(Although disguised, the facial recognition still flags them as suspects.)

(Jiangyu and Zhao Hui zoom into the crowd using the observation equipment. From the surveillance point behind the stage, they can see every detail of the people facing the stage.)

(They quickly find the suspects and begin to observe them closely.)

Jiangyu: This one... and this one... and this one. Zhao Hui, you mark the other ones. There are quite a few people acting strange; should we mark them all?

Zhao Hui: Those people are just drawn to Daiyan's music. Don't assume everyone is a suspect.

Jiangyu: Um, I just said they were acting strange, not that they're all suspects!

(Jiangyu refocuses on the previously identified individuals. In Jiangyu's observation equipment, the suspicious individuals start to gather and whisper among themselves.)

(Jiangyu activates the directional microphone, and their conversation is immediately transmitted to her earpiece.)

Suspect: Isn't this the song from our homeland...!

Suspect: It must be Esther's doing. Does she still want to stop us?

Suspect: Law enforcement arrested the engineering team this afternoon. We have to blow up the Yibo ourselves!

Jiangyu: Oh my god! Commander, did you hear that?

Commander: They must be Esther's best engineering team members, all disguised.

Commander: Springfield, synchronize with the law enforcement and proceed with the arrests.

Springfield: Understood.

(I watch the synchronized screen beside Jiangyu's observation equipment. Jiangyu and Zhao Hui have already locked onto the positions of seven individuals, matching the number of remaining engineering team members not yet caught.)

(But Flagg hasn't appeared, meaning he may have another plan.)

(As I ponder the countermeasures, thunderous applause erupts from the stage. Daiyan's performance has reached crescendo, and the enchanting melody elicits waves of cheers.)

(I look at the shared screen from the observation equipment. Plainclothes officers are already closing in on the identified suspects, making it only a matter of time before they are apprehended.)

Esther: Um, everyone, please listen to me!

(As Daiyan's performance nears its end, Esther slowly walks to the front of the stage. Daiyan looks up at her, noticing Esther peering back at her.)

(Daiyan gives her a reassuring nod. Esther smiles, then mustered her courage to begin speaking.)

Esther: This song is from Uzania, Uzamadeki, which was once our homeland. We called it "Mother's Tears."

Esther: It was a severely polluted place, so much so that the only thing that could grow there was potatoes.

Esther: To us, the potato flower represents hope, which is why this melody is called "When the Potato Flowers Bloom."

Esther: Our parents spent over ten years cultivating that land. They never blamed fate for the pollution, nor did they give up hope despite the hardships.

Esther: They did this because they wanted to live there forever. They wanted to be people with a homeland, a place to call home.

Suspect: Isn't that Esther? What is she saying?

Esther: As long as the land exists, we have a homeland.

Esther: But if there's no one left to return, it will no longer be "Uzamadeki", because no one else will remember its name!

Esther: So, we must return. We must return alive! As long as we continue living, we can have a new beginning!

Esther: My fellow countrymen, please stop. Don't allow our crimes to stain our homeland. There's still time to make amends!

(As Esther finishes speaking, Daiyan's performance also concludes with the final note.)

(The crowd under the stage starts to murmur, unable to understand the context of Esther's speech.)

(But the suspects from Uzania reveal complex expressions.)

Suspect: This song... this melody...

Suspect: I miss home... I want to go home...

Suspect: Can we really go home?

(The disguised workers involuntarily look at Esther on stage, who returned a glare straight through their disguises.)

(Realizing Esther's gaze, they simultaneously lower their heads.)

(While they are distracted, several plainclothes officers appear behind each of them, stealthily handcuffing the suspects from behind.)

(Perhaps it is Daiyan's performance or Esther's words, but these individuals are taken away without making a sound, offering no resistance as they are led to nearby secure vehicles.)

(The surrounding pedestrians don't even notice the law enforcement's actions.)

Esther: Everyone... I'm sorry...

(Esther sees everything unfold from the stage, a rush of emotions overwhelming her, bringing tears to her eyes. She deeply bowed to her fellow countrymen.)

((Witnessing the same scene onscreen, I breathe a sigh of relief. Perhaps my contingency plan won't be needed after all.))

Springfield: Commander, the law enforcement has verified the identities of the captured suspects. They match the last few names on Miss Esther's list.

Springfield: This means all members of the engineering team from Uzania have been apprehended.

Commander: At least that's one less thing to worry about.

Springfield: Should we withdraw our forces?

Commander: Monitor for another hour. If there's still no activity, then—

(Static noise interrupts the communication)

Springfield: Commander, what did you say?

Commander: The signal seems bad. I said: after one more hour, have them return to Zucchero.

Springfield: Understood. Additionally, the law enforcement mentioned that they also—

(The communication is suddenly disrupted by static, making Springfield's voice inaudible.)

Commander: Springfield, repeat last?

(Static noise fills the earpiece, followed by a more jarring sound.)

???: Commander, quite impressive methods you have. Truly admirable.

Commander: Forced communication? That voice... you must be Flagg.

Flagg: It's an honor to be remembered by my codename. What brings a legendary figure like you to this small satellite city?

Commander: To catch you, of course, and force you to reveal everything about Girard.

Flagg: No problem. I'd be happy to oblige. How about we talk face to face?

Flagg: I'm in the building one kilometer directly opposite your observation point. I'm sure you can find me.

Commander: What?

Flagg: It seems my previous challenge was too easy for you. Let's see how you handle this one.

Commander: What are you planning?

Flagg: You'll find out soon enough.

(Esther turns to Daiyan and bows deeply, wiping the tears from her eyes and smiling as she thanks Daiyan.)

Esther: Thank you, Miss Daiyan. Your performance was outstanding, and the arrangement was beautiful.

Daiyan: It was inspired by the potato flower you gave me. I'm glad you enjoyed it—

(Suddenly, Daiyan notices a glint of light from a distant building. Her years of combat experience kicks in, prompting an instinctive reaction.)

Daiyan: Watch out!

Esther: Wha—

(Daiyan springs up and pushes Esther aside, but it is a split second too late. A silent bullet strikes Esther.)

Esther: Aah!

(Due to Daiyan's push, the bullet only hits Esther's arm, but blood still spurts out as she collapses in pain.)

Daiyan: A sniper?!

Commander: All units be advised, the stage has been attacked by a sniper using a suppressed weapon. Springfield, identify the trajectory immediately!

Springfield: Understood, right away!

Passerby: What's happening up there?

Passerby: It looks like the performer collapsed all of a sudden?

Commander: Sharkry, release the smoke!

Sharkry: Nothing to worry about, folks! The show is over, thank you for watching!

(Sharkry quickly releases the dry ice on stage, and the billowing fog obscures the audience's view, masking the situation on stage.)

Jiangyu: Sis! Are you okay?

Daiyan: I'm fine, but Miss Esther is hurt. I'm trying to stop the bleeding, but we need medical support!

Springfield: I've already called for it. They'll be here soon!

Zhao Hui: Commander, I heard something troubling.

Commander: What is it?

Zhao Hui: The Yibo behind the stage has started moving, and the deactivated defense machines are also powering up.

(I look into the distance, seeing the Yibo and the machines, which are supposed to be deactivated, lighting up one by one.)

Commander: Damn it, this must be Flagg's doing. He just hacked into our communications to taunt me.

Springfield: They must have realized the engineering team was captured and are now remotely activating the machines to cause chaos.

Commander: Springfield, can you locate the sniper's position?

Daiyan: Commander, I saw the reflection of a sniper scope from the building directly opposite the stage!

Springfield: Yes, the helpers also confirmed the trajectory came from that direction.

Commander: Hmph, is this Flagg's invitation? I'm heading over there. Have them find a good position to cover me.

Springfield: Understood.

Commander: Jiangyu, Zhao Hui, go to Level II and prevent external remote control of those machines.

Commander: Sharkry, stay with Daiyan and secure the stage.

Commander: Daiyan, after Esther is taken to the hospital, catch up with me immediately.

Daiyan: Commander, it's too dangerous for you to go alone!

Commander: No risk, no reward. Flagg will only show himself if I go alone.

Daiyan: At least let me accompany you...

Commander: Someone has to save Esther. Besides, going alone will make Flagg lower his guard.

Daiyan: Understood... I'll be there soon. I won't keep you waiting.

Commander: See you then.

(After issuing all the commands, I check my equipment and start running towards the building.)

Commander: It's time to make him pay for Esther and her compatriots.

AD-1-7 Unexpected Key Change

(Jiangyu and Zhao Hui leap from the observation point, rushing towards Yibo's location. The activated Yibo begins to accelerate slowly, with defense machines flanking it.)

Zhao Hui: It looks like these machines are going to charge into the crowd. Jiangyu, can you cut off their remote control in five seconds?

Jiangyu: Huh? How is that possible? I'm not a dedicated electronic warfare Doll. It would take a lot of time to hack into all these machines!

Zhao Hui: If they charge into the crowd, all our previous efforts will be for naught.

Jiangyu: I get it, I really do! Why don't YOU hack them?

Zhao Hui: I don't have an invasion module. I thought a former Griffin elite Doll like you could handle it.

Jiangyu: UGH, you're so annoying! Fine, I'll deal with Yibo!

(Jiangyu jumps onto Yibo's back and initiates the connection to it. Yibo's movements slowed slightly due to Jiangyu's invasion, but it continues stumbling towards the stage.)

Sharkry: Rash minds aren't very useful. It seems we'll have to rely on the ever-clever Sharkry~

Jiangyu: What are you yapping about, lantern girl?

Sharkry: To create a spectacular stage effect, the stage is equipped with dry ice machines that emit white mist. With the lights on, it's a colorful, dreamy scene! It's my favorite stage effect!

Jiangyu: Stage effect? Who cares about stage effects right now?!

Zhao Hui: The idol here means using the low temperature of the dry ice to cause Yibo to malfunction, giving us time to hack and cut off external connections.

Sharkry: Miss Zhao Hui is sharp. I've already turned the machines to maximum power. You two, do your jobs quickly.

(Sharkry pushed the dry ice machines to the back of the stage, with emitted smoke choking Yibo's path. Affected by the dry ice, Yibo started to short-circuit, but the faster defense machines had already reached Sharkry.)

Sharkry: It seems Sharkry will have to work overtime today. Well, that's the fate of a super idol~

Zhao Hui: I'll help you. It's too boring to stand by idly.

Sharkry: A new collab isn't bad. Let's handle these small fry together.

During Battle

Jiangyu: Security robots with abnormal codes, stop immediately! Or we'll be forced to take action!

Sharkry: Sharkry is happy to work overtime for enthusiastic fans~ Please continue to support Sharkry with all your heart ♥

After Battle

Sharkry: Done! I took down more this time!

Zhao Hui: Jiangyu, how are things on your end?

Jiangyu: Don't bother me, I'm doing my best!

(Despite Jiangyu's hacking efforts, Yibo keeps moving towards the stage, nearing the area. The dry ice machines are at maximum power but are still insufficient.)

(Noticing something unusual, whispers circulated as some tried getting a closer look. Yibo slowly emerges from the smoke, and the crowd erupt in cheers and applause.)

Jiangyu: Why are they clapping? They should be running!

Zhao Hui: The audience thinks this is part of the celebration. They're gathering to watch the spectacle.

Sharkry: At this time, it should be Yibo's "Dotting of the Eyes" ceremony. Let's turn this mishap into a grand show.

Jiangyu: Huh?

(Sharkry throws a large brush to Jiangyu, who catches it with a bewildered expression.)

Sharkry: My new partner, this is for you! I'll go perform on stage and draw everyone's attention!

(Zhao Hui catches something from Sharkry. On closer inspection, she sees it is a hose with a nozzle, connected to the dry ice machines on stage. Zhao Hui realizes it is a dry ice freeze gun, perfect for dealing with Yibo.)

(Meanwhile, the stage lights flash, and Sharkry appears amid the swirling mist. The music sounded, and she draws everyone's attention.)

Jiangyu: Zhao Hui! It's opening its mouth!

(Seizing the moment, Zhao Hui, with Jiangyu's help, shoves the dry ice gun into Yibo's mouth. Like a mythical beast, Yibo spewed forth a mist as the dry ice sprayed.)

(The sudden rapid cooling finally temporarily disables Yibo.)

Sharkry: Everyone, look! The highlight of tonight, Yibo's "Dotting of the Eyes" ceremony, is about to begin! Rash girl, quickly, dot its eyes with the brush!

Jiangyu: I'm on it!

(Under the curious gaze of the unaware audience, Jiangyu paints two black dots in Yibo's blank eye sockets. As soon as the brush touched, the crowd exploded into roaring praise and applause, exceeding the first wave.)

Sharkry: Thank you all for attending the "Dotting of the Eyes" ceremony. May this year be prosperous and mellow ♥

(The atmosphere reaches the climax. Everyone is jubilant, entrusting their future hopes to be fulfilled by Yibo. Only Jiangyu still struggles to gain control over Yibo.)

Jiangyu: Damn big bastard, just listen to me already!

AD 1-8 Secret Performance

During Battle

Sharkry: Hey, hey! Rash girl, have you taken control of Yibo and the defense machines?

Jiangyu: So annoying, I'm working on it!

Jiangyu: Ugh, why does Yibo look so terrifying in Level II?

Daiyan: The internal design here is very complex, and the firewall level is high. Be sure to stay safe.

Jiangyu: Sis, aren't you tailing the Commander?

Daiyan: I'm on my way. For now, I'll provide remote computing support. Hang in there, Jiangyu.

Jiangyu: No worries, Sis. Watch me take care of it in a jiffy!

Sharkry: I'll help too~

Jiangyu: I can handle it myself!

After Battle

(Jiangyu finally manages to gain control of Yibo's system.)

Jiangyu: I'm exhausted... Hacking complete. I've taken control of Yibo.

Jiangyu: Zhao Hui, did you see that? Wasn't I super cool just now?

Zhao Hui: Let's hope the audience doesn't think twice about anything amiss during the "Dotting of the Eyes" ceremony.

Sharkry: Compared to just dotting a few spots with a brush, Sharkry's excellent stage control was the real highlight~

Jiangyu: Huh? What are you talking about? You should be thanking me for handling this big guy!

(To prove her point, Jiangyu pats the now stationary Yibo forcefully.)

(As if responding to Jiangyu, Yibo suddenly starts moving again after opening its eyes.)

Jiangyu: Wh-What's happening?!

Zhao Hui: Why is Yibo moving again?

Jiangyu: Damn it! Someone is trying to regain remote control!

Sharkry: Huh? There's no second chance for a "Dotting of the Eyes" ceremony!

Jiangyu: I know! I'll direct this big guy back to its original spot and we'll destroy it once and for all!

Zhao Hui: While sounding relatively straightforward, I don't mind. Can you still control its direction?

Jiangyu: I'm trying!

(With great effort, Jiangyu finally manages to corral Yibo around. It begins moving towards the back of the stage.)

Sharkry: Destroying an already "dotted" Yibo might bring bad luck, don't you think?

Jiangyu: At this point, who cares about luck? Let's send it off properly to complete the Commander's mission!

Zhao Hui: Yes, I agree. Destroying it is safer. Besides, we've already removed the explosives, so there's no danger.

Sharkry: Hmm... Fine, it's not Sharkry's problem anyway. Let's get it done quickly~

AD-1-9 Perfect Ending

During Battle

Jiangyu: This big guy just won't quit!

Sharkry: While Sharkry loves enthusiastic fans, being overly persistent will make a girl dislike you~

Jiangyu: What are you babbling about, lantern girl? Let's finish off this big guy!

Sharkry: Yes, yes, let's give this celebration a perfect ending~

After Battle

(I ascend the stairwell floor by floor. The abandoned building has walls so dilapidated that the supporting steel beams are exposed.)

(The colorful spectacle from the fireworks reflects across my face, briefly bathing the interior in various hues.)

(Looking down, the jubilant crowd on the street follows the parade floats, with converging lights resembling bouquets.)

(I finally reach the floor where the sniper is. I take out my decade-old handgun, check the chamber, and proceed cautiously.)

(Entering the level, I notice a cartoon bomb sticker on the door directly opposite the stairs, which makes me frown.)

Commander: Such poor taste...

Commander: I'm starting my operation. You proceed as well.

???: Yes, Commander.

(I carefully open the door, scanning the room. Like the stairwell, it was drafty with no intact walls.)

(The room is empty except for some broken furniture and rubble from fallen walls.)

(A man stands by a distant window with his back to me. I approach with my gun drawn.)

Flagg: Today is such a joyous day. It's been a long time since I've seen such a lively celebration.

Commander: If you really appreciated it, you wouldn't try to destroy it.

Flagg: Just trying. You stopped me, didn't you?

(Flagg turns around, his unkempt face devoid of any expression.)

(Seeing that he isn't holding a weapon, I lowered my gun slightly.)

Flagg: Commander, that Yibo was just a test.

Flagg: This was just a game, a small test. I initially wanted to test that woman, but she brought in a substitute.

Commander: A game? Setting off bombs in a city is a game to you?

Flagg: Living in a world like this, isn't life itself a game?

(Flagg lights a cigarette and takes a deep drag.)

(He moves slowly, and I keep my distance and angle while watching him.)

Flagg: When you saved Esther, I guessed it was you, Commander. Such a familiar methods.

Commander: Do I know you?

Flagg: You don't, but I know you. Commander, for ten years you've disappeared.

Flagg: In our eyes, you were a hero ten years ago.

Commander: I don't recall ever being a hero.

Flagg: You're too modest, Commander.

Flagg: During the Battle of Frankfurt, I was just a nobody. It's normal you don't know me.

Flagg: But your deeds in Frankfurt were well-known. We saw you as the hero who pushed for the formation of the URNC.

Flagg: After that great victory, everyone was elated.

Flagg: But then you vanished.

Flagg: We thought everything would change, that people like you would expedite that change. We hoped and longed for it, but nothing happened.

Flagg: And the URNC? Calling it a disappointment would be a compliment.

Flagg: It felt like betrayal...

Flagg: That's right, Commander. You and the URNC betrayed those of us who had faith in you.

Commander: ...

Flagg: So I realized, we don't need false hope. We need a revolution! A complete worldly-worldwide reshuffling!

Commander: Your so-called revolution involves destroying innocent lives, so you can hide and spout nonsense?

Flagg: How else will the URNC wake up? This is a warning, a necessary sacrifice.

Commander: If you truly wanted the URNC to wake up, you should risk your own life, not incite others.

Commander: If you really fought in Frankfurt, you'd know everything comes with a price. Your hypocritical words make me sick.

Flagg: Heh heh... With you, it seems discussing ideals is useless.

Flagg: Look at it another way. Despite this terrible era, for those with abilities, it's a perfect stage.

Flagg: Commander, with your skills, if you join us, you could quickly rise to the top of the armed division.

Flagg: Don't you wish to return to what defines you?

Flagg: We can provide everything you want. You could regain your troops, your base, all your forces.

Flagg: Even if those in the URNC want to act against you, they wouldn't dare with our backing.

Flagg: I've researched your past decade. You were exiled to the Yellow Zone by the URNC's top brass.

Flagg: Compared to combating the Varjager Gang in the contaminated zones from day-to-day, wouldn't you prefer to live a privileged life back in the White Zone?

Flag: I've also heard you have a special interest in Dolls. For you, we could provide all funds for any model of Doll, to do anything that... satisfies you.

(I look at Flagg coldly as he excitedly makes his offers.)

(So, this talk of revolution and change is just a guise of self-interest. That's why I despise these double-dealers.)

(I raise my gun again, no longer willing to listen to his nonsense.

Commander: First of all, you got one thing wrong. I wasn't exiled; I chose to live in the Yellow Zone.

Commander: Secondly, I like Dolls because they don't lie like you do.

Commander: And if there's one thing that satisfies me most about Dolls, it's seeing them blow the brains out of scum like you.

(Hearing my words, Flagg's excited expression fades back to the initial coldness. He suppresses his anger, his eyes burning with a desire to bury me.)

Flagg: As rumored, you're a stubborn person, Commander. That's why you've fallen to this state.

Commander: Yes, even I sometimes hate my own personality.

Flagg: It seems we can't reach an agreement.

Commander: If you have any tricks left, it's time to show your hand.

(Flagg waves his hand, and several henchmen hidden in the room spring out, pointing their guns at me.)

Flagg: Since we can't cooperate, I'll have to ask you to die.

Commander: Such a cliché move. I've been waiting for this.

Flagg: What?

Commander: Macchiato, your turn.

(A bullet immediately strikes one gunman in the head from the side. Before the others can react, a second shot kills another.)

(The gunmen look terrified, but Flagg laughs maniacally.)

Flagg: HAHAAHAHA! Commander, warriors should communicate this way!

(Flagg doesn't care about his men dying. He rolls into cover, pulls out a gun, and starts firing at my position.)

(I dive into the cover I selected earlier, repositioning to avoid his suppressive fire.)

(I activate a small force shield, aim my gun through a small angle, and begin shooting at the gunmen, creating a crossfire with the sniper's support.)

(One gunman, trying to avoid sniper fire, moves toward my direction.)

(I shoot him in the thigh, causing him to lose balance and fall out of cover, a sniper's headshot following thereafter.)

(The remaining gunmen have nowhere to hide. Moving in any direction exposes them to gunfire. Two more fall in the ensuing chaos.)

(Flagg identifies the sniper's position and, while his men draw the sniper's fire, dilapidated walls to evade bullets as he charges towards my cover.)

(He tosses aside his submachine gun, draws a knife, and leaps over the barrier, using the momentum to pierce through the force shield, aiming for my chest.)

(I'm caught off guard by Flagg's aggressive strike. Unable to aim my gun, I parried the jab with my handgun's receiver, pushing the knife aside.)

(The force of the stab pushes me back several steps. Flagg immediately follows with a kick.)

(The heavy kick knocks me off balance, and I fall backward to the ground.)

Macchiato: Commander, I can't support your position!

Commander: Got it!

(I scan my surroundings. A solid wall blocks the line between my position and Macchiato.)

(Flagg exploits this to engage me in close combat. His combat experience is extensive.)

(Two more gunmen emerge, one getting sniped through the chest, while I shoot the other dead from my prone position.)

(A click signals my gun's empty magazine. At that moment, Flagg lunges at me again.)

(I discard the handgun, grabbing Flagg's wrist with all my strength to prevent the knife from sinking inwards.)

Commander: Damn... Such strength!

Flagg: Commander, you're just a speck of dust. I thought you were the chosen one, but I was wrong.

Commander: Chosen? I don't want to be chosen by you!

Flagg: Then die!

(Flagg uses his body weight to press down the knife. Despite my efforts, the knife's descent only slows slightly.)

(Flagg's eyes widen with a menacing smile, determined to take my life.)

Daiyan: Commander!!!

(A Doll's voice shatters his dream. Daiyan fires a precise shot, striking Flagg's body.)

(I kick Flagg off me, and without worrying about hitting me, Daiyan fires a short burst, forcing Flagg to collapse.)

Daiyan: Sorry, Commander, I'm late...

Commander: Not too late, Daiyan. You saved my life.

(I struggle to my feet, picking up the discarded handgun.)

(Flagg, shot, struggles to sit up, ready to resist.)

Commander: Don't struggle. You'll lose less blood and you might survive.

Flagg: Don't think you've won. Even if I can't kill you, I have other ways!

(Flagg suddenly pulls out a detonator, pressing it rapidly with a triumphant grin.)

Flagg: Let's die together!

(But nothing happens.)

Flagg: What?

Commander: You placed the remaining explosives in this building's basement, didn't you?

Commander: Your plan was to blow up this building, killing me and causing chaos in the city. A clever idea. But my Dolls already defused the bombs.

Flagg: Impossible! I had plenty of men guarding the basement. How could you have enough Dolls to breach it?

Commander: You should ask my extra helpers.

(I initiate a communication. The other party quickly answers my call.)

Commander: Centaureissi, status?

Centaureissi: All bombs are defused, and the remaining armed men are neutralized.

Commander: Well done, Centaureissi. Only you could handle this so swiftly.

Centaureissi: Thank you for the compliment. It's my duty as a maid.

Flagg: When did you launch the attack?

Commander: While you were reminiscing and boasting about what you could offer me.

(Realizing I had bought time, Flagg laughs bitterly.)

Flagg: Hahaha... As expected of the Commander... No wonder you dared to come alone. You used yourself as bait to distract me.

Flagg: Sniper support in the open, disabling my traps in the dark. Such meticulous planning. No wonder you're a legend.

(Flagg throws the detonator aside, pulling out a cigarette. I notice something strange about his body.)

Commander: Your body...

(Flagg's chest wounds bleed red, but black fluid oozes from his abdominal wounds.)

Flagg: Heh, finally noticed? This is your old friend's tech.

Flagg: Don't worry, I've uploaded my consciousness. You may have won this time, but we'll meet again.

Commander: Daiyan, finish him.

Daiyan: Yes, Commander.

(A bullet nails Flagg's head precisely, splattering a dark stain on the wall.)

Commander: As expected... his body has been modified with Paradeus technology...

Daiyan: Paradeus... weren't they destroyed ten years ago?

Commander: It seems we haven't completely eradicated them yet.

Macchiato: Commander, I can't see any more enemies on my side. Is the danger over on your end?

Commander: All enemies have been neutralized. Thanks, Macchiato, your support was timely. I owe you one.

Macchiato: Hmph, my appearance fee is quite high. I doubt you can afford it. How do you plan to compensate me?

Commander: Uh... can we discuss it when we get back to Zuccherò? I'll do whatever you say then.

Macchiato: Anything... you'll do anything I say!?

Commander: Yes, yes...

Macchiato: Since you put it that way, let's talk about it when we get back~

Commander: You're not planning something weird, are you?

Macchiato: I-I'm not planning anything weird! Hmph!

(Macchiato abruptly ends the communication, and I finally breathe a sigh of relief.)

Commander: Phew... managed to dodge that bullet for now...

Daiyan: Miss Macchiato and Miss Centaureissi sound just like they used to.

Commander: Yeah, and their skills haven't diminished. Luckily, they arrived just in time to support us.

(As the adrenaline wears off, my legs suddenly give way. Daiyan supports me and gently lowers me into a chair.)

Daiyan: Commander, are you alright?

Commander: I'm fine, just haven't had such intense exercise in a while.

Commander: Even in the Yellow Zone, we can't slack off on training... How's the situation on the stage?

Daiyan: Miss Esther was taken by the security department's medical team. Jiangyu and the others dealt with the out-of-control Yibo, not only controlling the situation but also performing a "Dotting of the Eyes" ceremony, though they had to destroy Yibo in the end.

Commander: Poor Yibo... we should praise them when we get back, especially Jiangyu. She probably values your opinion a lot.

Daiyan: That dork... she could be more independent.

Commander: Haha... it feels so nostalgic. We used to chat so casually at Griffin. I can't believe ten years have passed in the blink of an eye.

Daiyan: Yes... Much has seemed to change, yet nothing has truly changed.

Commander, actually I—

(Daiyan starts to say something, but an urgent communication suddenly comes in. I hesitate but decide to answer.)

Kalina: Commander, can you hear me?

Commander: Kalin? What's wrong? Why are you using this secure channel?

Kalina: Commander, we have a unique situation. We need to change our plan.

Commander: What happened?

Kalina: I think it's better for Levva to tell you.

Commander: Levva, 45?

Levva: That's right, it's me, Commander. Did you miss me?

Commander: Uh... just a little bit.

Levva: That's a heartbreaking answer. I've been thinking about you all the time.

Commander: It's better if you don't. What's going on?

Levva: Didn't you send Groza Squad to support Squad 404?

Levva: They've met up, but the situation is more complicated than expected.

Levva: They've suffered heavy damage. Although they've retreated to the Elmo, the enemy is expected to be preparing another assault.

Levva: So, Commander, you need to return to the Elmo immediately. Groza Squad and 404 need you.

Commander: What happened? Kalin, didn't you say this was a simple retrieval mission?

Kalina: The plan changed. 404 had a fierce clash with Mangi Security Services during the mission.

Commander: Magni Security?

Kalina: They're a security contractor backed by a large conglomerate. Although they call themselves contractors, their firepower far exceeds typical contractors. Their combat capability is significantly greater than our intel suggested.

Kalina: 404 and Groza Squad repelled them, but I doubt they'll give up easily.

Commander: Is this related to Girard again? I just finished cleaning up the mess from CHE-02 involving Girard.

Kalina: I received Springfield's report. My investigation suggests they once assisted the Girard Group, and I fear there's some connection here.

Kalina: Girard Group's executor in CHE-02 was "Flagg." As a remnant of the Girard Group, he may possess valuable information. What's his status now?

Commander: He's lying dead next to me.

Kalina: Eh... did you kill him, Commander?

Commander: He tried to kill me; I had no choice.

Commander: Blood from his wound was half red, half black... you know what that means, right?

Kalina: Yes... I've heard reports linking Paradeus with the Girard Group. Things are growing more complex...

Kalina: I understand the situation now. must return to the Elmo ASAP. I'll be sharing the details of the next step on your way.

Kalina: Springfield will handle the aftermath at CHE-02. I'll send additional support as well.

Commander: Okay, I'll leave the rest to you.

Levva: Take care of Clukay and the others, Commander, but be sure to send them back to me. If they stay with you too long, I'll be swamped.

Commander: Sure, I'll let them know how much you care about them.

Levva: Commander, I didn't expect your sense of humor to improve the most over these ten years~

Kalina: Alright, Levva, enough chit-chat.

Kalina: Commander, the nearest intercontinental train from CHE-02 departs in 45 minutes. If you leave now, you should make it.

Commander: Understood, I'll leave immediately.

(I close the communication and let out a deep sigh. There's barely any time to catch my breath. I silently complain to myself, though I dare not say it out loud.)

Daiyan: Commander, are you leaving now?

(Daiyan looks at me with longing eyes. We finally met again, but we haven't had a chance to talk properly. I also wish we could sit down and chat, but there's no time.)

Commander: Seems I have no choice.

Daiyan: Will... will we meet again?

Commander: I believe we will—someday, somewhere...

(Daiyan droops her head, lingering in silence. She then takes out a small pendant and turns to me.)

Daiyan: Commander, please take this.

(She carefully places a small glass bottle with a white flower in my hand.)

(The glass bottle holds a beautiful white flower, the pendant resembling an exquisite piece of art.)

Daiyan: This white flower was given to me by Esther. I believe it symbolizes longing.

Daiyan: I placed it in the glass bottle, hoping it can symbolize my longing as well.

Daiyan: Now I'm giving it to you, Commander. I hope you'll think of me when you see it.

(Daiyan hesitates for a moment, then musters the courage to speak.)

Daiyan: Commander, please don't forget me.

(I look at her earnest expression and tie the pendant around my hand.)

(Seeing this, Daiyan smiles with relief.)

Commander: I won't forget you, Daiyan. Thank you for everything.

Commander: Well... until we meet again.

(I stand up and limp down the stairs, while Daiyan stands in the room, staring out the window.)

Daiyan: We will meet again... we will...

(The next morning, the satellite city sleeps soundly, remnants of the festival's revelry still lingering.)

(A "CLOSED" sign hangs on the door of the Zuccherò Café, but inside, a lively bargaining session is underway.)

(In one corner, Jiangyu clutches her still-warm money pouch, peeking pitifully at Sharkry across from her.)

(Sharkry smiles, her idol-like smirk appearing devilish in Jiangyu's eyes.)

Jiangyu: Let's... negotiate again!

Sharkry: Dear customer, we agreed on this from the start.

(Jiangyu reluctantly extends the money pouch, but Sharkry finds finds Jiangyu still clinging to it.)

Sharkry: Oh my~ you don't want to let go?

Jiangyu: Ugh... we risked our lives to earn this bonus...

Sharkry: Oh, Sharkry knows you made a great contribution during the "Dotting of the Eyes" ceremony.

Sharkry: Look, your picture is even in the latest Satellite City Daily!

Sharkry: Although it doesn't take up as much space as Sharkry's performance photo, your figure is defined~

Sharkry: You're a celebrity now, and celebrities can't tarnish their reputation by being "debt dodgers" ♥

Jiangyu: I don't want to be famous, I just want my bonus... Ugh... my bonus...

Jiangyu: Couldn't you charge a little less? Your Dinergates are still fine!

Sharkry: But you did break one of my pet Dinergates~

Sharkry: And Sharkry contributed a lot to this operation too~

Sharkry: Since we worked together, you really shouldn't default on the payment ♥

Jiangyu: This is so unfair... Waaaah... Zhao Hui! Zhao Hui!

Sharkry: Oh, come on~ no more struggling! Debt settled! Congratulations!

(Sharkry flashes her sweet, innocent smile, her hands busy prying open Jiangyu's fingers one by one, finally securing the compensation money.)

Sharkry: Thank you for your patronage~ As a special guest of Sharkry, enjoy these two freshly made "Spring Heart Lattes" on the house~

Sharkry: There are no other customers now, so enjoy the exclusive feeling~ Don't forget to leave Sharkry a good review, enjoy ♥

(Sharkry bounces off to the kitchen, while Jiangyu, dejected, grabs the sleeve that appears in front of her.)

(The sleeve belongs to Zhao Hui.)

Jiangyu: Zhao Hui, why didn't you speak up for me! We might have kept some...

Zhao Hui: I think she has a point, and money is just a material thing. We shouldn't get too hung up on it.

Jiangyu: I wanted to buy a pretty knuckle duster with that money... I've been eyeing it for so long...

Zhao Hui: I think you can show your strength without it.

Jiangyu: You're teasing me at a time like this... Sis, tell Zhao Hui to stop...

(Daiyan, sitting at the bar, smiles and shakes her head, always helpless against her noisy sister.)

Daiyan: I'll buy the knuckle duster as a reward for stopping Yibo.

Jiangyu: (Sob) ...so kind... you're the best, Sis...

Daiyan: Don't cry, don't cry. When we get to the next satellite city, we'll earn more money through our performances.

(Jiangyu seizes the opportunity to snuggle into Daiyan's arms, who strokes her head, feeling a mix of expectation and melancholy.)

(The bell at the café door rings as Springfield walks in with newly purchased coffee beans, followed by an angry Macchiato and a smiling Centaureissi.)

Macchiato: That idiot! He is making me so mad! He promised to meet in the café, but he disappeared faster than a rabbit!

Centaureissi: If it's a call from Miss Kalina, it must've been urgent for the Commander. There will be another chance to meet next time.

Macchiato: Huh? Who said I wanted to meet him?! I'm just mad about going on a mission without getting paid!

Springfield: Who was the one that heard the Commander needed support and rushed back to CHE-02 overnight, leaving a high-paying commission?

Macchiato: N-No! I came back because you said you needed help, Springfield!

Macchiato: If you hadn't asked me to check on Esther, the Commander wouldn't have slipped away so quickly...

Daiyan: Is Miss Esther alright?

Macchiato: She's stable.

Macchiato: The injury wasn't fatal; she'll recover with some rest.

Springfield: Thankfully, with Miss Esther's help, we managed to coordinate with the security department to successfully host the celebration.

Springfield: She took all the blame for the bombs, so her fellow countrymen will only face short-term detention. I think they'll be released soon.

Jiangyu: Huh? She's pretty brave to take responsibility for such a big incident alone.

Springfield: Originally, she might have been sentenced to life imprisonment, but her heroism in preventing the catastrophe will likely lead to a lighter sentence.

Springfield: I hope she can restart her life soon.

Daiyan: That's wonderful. Everything is settled then.

Springfield: Why are you all here so early?

Jiangyu: Ugh... it's that lantern girl. She kept urging me to settle the debt quickly...

Springfield: Haha, Centaureissi, maybe we should let Sharky handle the accounts in the future?

Centaureissi: No problem, Miss Springfield.

Daiyan: Actually, we came early to say goodbye while the café isn't busy.

Springfield: Hmm? Not staying a bit longer?

Daiyan: I've completed the impression song for this satellite city, so it's time to travel to our next destination.

Daiyan: But before that, I have a favor to ask of you, Miss Springfield.

Springfield: What is it?

Daiyan: The impression song for this city—"When the Potato Flowers Bloom," I want to play it here once more. I hope you can help me record it.

(Springfield nods, fetching a recording device and placing it by Daiyan's guzheng.)

Springfield: Everyone, come listen to Daiyan's performance!

(Springfield gathers everyone around Daiyan, who smiles and sits close by, taking the nearest spot.)

(Springfield winks at Daiyan and starts the recording.)

(The gentle sunlight filters through the windows, illuminating the café floor.)

(Amidst the aroma of coffee and under the attentive gazes, Daiyan begins to play the song filled with memories of one's homeland.)

(The recording continues, and surely this piece will play in the Zucchero Café for many afternoons to come.)

(Daiyan finishes the song to applause and begins packing her things to leave.)

Springfield: I'll keep this recording safe. Next time I meet the Commander... I'll give him a copy too.

Daiyan: Thank you so much.

Springfield: Do you have a destination for the next city?

Daiyan: I'll follow my intuition. Inspiration for my music needs to be discovered gradually.

Springfield: Sounds good. I wish you a safe journey. If you compose new pieces, let me know; I'll buy them to play in the café.

Daiyan: Thank you, Miss Springfield.

Springfield: No need to be so formal. Even if you don't have new music, you can always visit me if you run into trouble. The Zucchero Café will always welcome you.

Daiyan: Thank you, Miss Springfield. I'll remember that.

Daiyan: So, farewell for now.

(Daiyan and her companions bid farewell to the inhabitants of the Zucchero Café.)

(As they push open the café door, a ray of sunlight bathes them warmly.)

Jiangyu: Zhao Hui, you've been quiet for a while. What are you thinking about?

Zhao Hui: I'm thinking about what happened over the past two days.

Zhao Hui: In retrospect, you were right.

Jiangyu: Wow! Did I hear that right, Sis? Zhao Hui actually agrees with me!

Jiangyu: I don't know what you're agreeing with, but it feels incredible.

Zhao Hui: Is it that surprising...?

Daiyan: So, what is it that you agree with, Zhao Hui?

Zhao Hui: "After this mission, you'll be part of the team, and you'll quickly see how amazing the Commander is!" That's what Jiangyu said.

Jiangyu: Oh, that's what you mean!

Jiangyu: See, I was right!

Zhao Hui: Indeed, under the Commander's leadership, our adventure proved intensely thrilling.

Zhao Hui: I think next time something like this happens, I'll be able to naturally join in the discussion with you all.

Jiangyu: Oh, this mission really brought back that feeling from Griffin. It was amazing.

Zhao Hui: Although I wasn't at Griffin, I think I sympathize with how you felt.

Jiangyu: Shame that this time was so short. Sis, do you think we'll get another chance to meet the Commander?

Daiyan: Of course, we'll definitely meet again. Maybe in the next city, we'll run into the Commander by chance.

Jiangyu: Really? Then what are we waiting for? Let's get going!

(Daiyan holds her guzheng, her gaze drifting toward the horizon, the faint music from the café still echoing in her ears—"When the Potato Flowers Bloom...")

(Behind them, the satellite city CHE-02 remains immersed in the celebration's festive atmosphere.)

(With new experiences in tow, the group sets off once again.)

(Behind them, friends wave goodbye. Ahead, who knows where their next stop will be, or if they will meet that person again?)

(Daiyan doesn't know, yet the anticipation fills her.)

[—Harmony Beyond Borders - END]