

My Dearest

A Stuttering Restart



??????? Can you see?

??????? What you're looking at now is the Consciousness Digitization interface, but you don't need to worry about that. Leave the external processing to me.

??????? Just like a Doll's neural cloud, your consciousness will be transformed into digitized data.

??????? Take a deep breath, don't be nervous.

??????? The next test may cause a slight stinging sensation...

(A familiar voice reverberates in my mind like a whisper. The low, rhythmic ticking of the instrument is like a hypnotic beat, lulling me into a state of drowsy fatigue.)

(Through the hazy veil of the consciousness digitization interface, I catch sight of that gentle pink figure, busily working at the console.)

Commander: Pe... Persica...

??????? Clear your mind of all unnecessary thoughts. Keep a close watch on his condition.

??????? Ah! Right away!

Commander: I...

Commander: ...Why does this feel so familiar?

(An indescribable sense of suffocation grips my throat like an invisible shackle. The image before me twists and distorts, as if reality itself is teetering on the verge of collapse.)

???: ...Exiled... Gazing toward...

Commander: You're...! Ugh...

Commander: Ghh...AAHHHHHHH!

?????: Commander! This is bad, the Commander...!

?????: Miss Persica, abort the test!

?????: For god's sake... I told you, no unnecessary thoughts.

(The digitization interface vanishes in an instant, and the crushing discomfort recedes like a receding tide.)

(My vision swims in a peaceful void. Then, the hatch of the submersion pod slowly opens, and a piercing light pours in like salvation.)

Commander: Huff... Mayling.

Mayling: Commander, are you all right?!

Commander: I'm fine, just a little short of breath.

Persicaria: I'll recalibrate the equipment. We're running out of time, so we'll proceed straight to the matter afterward.

Persicaria: I expect you to do better next time, Commander.

Lewis: Miss Persica, it wasn't the Commander's fault...

Commander: It's fine, Lewis. Miss Persica's right, we're running out of time.

Commander: How's Groza's squad holding up?

(I glance at the command terminal nearby. The screen is covered in dense red error messages, as glaring as fresh blood, all of them tracing back to the members of Groza's squad.)

Mayling: Their condition is worsening. The virus keeps gnawing away at their neural clouds.

Commander: And the Elmo?

Mayling: It's bad.

(The gloom on Mayling's face is as thick as a storm cloud. I can only shake my head helplessly as a sense of powerlessness wells up in my chest.)

Lewis: Most of the Elmo's automated systems are down, but we can still operate it manually.

Lewis: Though manpower is scarce, and precision handling is out of the question, we've hidden the Elmo in the ruins of the Yellow Zone.

Lewis: So there shouldn't be any major problems.

(Lewis tries to reassure both Mayling and me as she passes a cup of warm coffee into my hands.)

Lewis: Commander, here's some coffee I brewed. The caffeine should ease the aftereffects of digitization.

Commander: Thanks, Lewis... Oh, and welcome back.

Lewis: Mm. I'm back, Commander.

Lewis: I made a cup for Mayling-chan too.

Lewis: And I left yours by the console, Miss Persica.

(Persica doesn't so much as turn around. She continues recalibrating the submersion pod, as if nothing else in the world concerns her.)

Mayling: Wow, it's so fancy! It even has latte art of a toy tin soldier!

Mayling: Phew... just what I needed to perk up... Sip... Huh?

(Mayling stiffens the moment the liquid touches her tongue, her face contorting as though teetering on the verge of losing control.)

Commander: Mayling?

(Oblivious, I absent-mindedly sip from my own cup.)

(An overwhelming, cloying sweetness detonates across my tongue like a mini big-bang, scorching my throat and battering my taste buds into a voiceless protest.)

Commander: I let my guard down...

Commander: It's fine, Mayling. Spit it out.

Mayling: Pffff! Cough, cough...

Mayling: W-What is this?! It tastes like mop water drowned in a lethal dose of sugar!

Lewis: Eh? Ah!

Lewis: S-Sorry! I must have brewed it to Miss Persica's taste out of habit!

Commander: This cloying sweetness... It really has been a long time.

Mayling: Commander... I can't believe you drank that with a straight face.

Commander: Well, I've had plenty before... huh?

Lewis: Commander?

Commander: No... it's nothing...

(Words that should've naturally left my mouth are now stuck in my throat like a fishbone, impossible to get out.)

(No matter how deep I dig into the dusty corners of my memory, I can't seem to grasp the reason that should be so obvious. It's as if a fragment of my past has been erased, leaving only a phantom trace.)

Persicaria: ...

Persicaria: Break time's over. I've finished checking your data.

Persicaria: Congratulations, Commander. Your readings meet the minimum threshold for consciousness conversion.

Persicaria: Although there was a small mishap just now, it won't affect the process of converting your consciousness into a neursoul.

Persicaria: Of course, if you don't want to experience that kind of pain again, don't let your mind wander during the conversion process.

(Miss Persica puts down her data terminal, and, as if in desperate need of a sugar rush from mental exhaustion, chugs down the sickeningly sweet coffee.)

Mayling: S-Sugoi...

Commander: ...

(I fix my gaze on Miss Persica, waiting for her to finish her cup. She seems to realize what I have in mind.)

Persicaria: ...Go on, what do you want to know?

Commander: Explain what's going on. From the reason why Groza's Squad and the Elmo were infected by a virus during their field operation, and why you came to the Elmo.

Commander: We had barely managed to restore power when you contacted us, then you even rushed here yourself... That isn't like you, Miss Persica.

Commander: Especially considering my current situation, you of all people shouldn't be here.

Persicaria: ...How far has the infection spread?

Lewis: It's still at LVLII. It hasn't reached their base layer yet, but Charolic and Colphne are in bad shape.

Lewis: Both of their infection rates have already exceeded thirty percent. It won't be long before they enter a state of continuous shutdown... and eventually enter hibernation.

Persicaria: ...I see.

(Persica sets down her cup and exhales a long, heavy sigh.)

Persicaria: A week ago, 16Lab observed a peculiar virus targeting Doll neural clouds... or rather, targeting artificial intelligence in general.

Persicaria: It spreads at alarming speed, propagating by assimilating, absorbing, even replacing the data of Dolls or AIs.

Persicaria: Currently, 16Lab has named it Entropy.

Commander: Entropy... How fitting. It matches the behavior you've described.

Commander: Is there a cure?

Persicaria: At present, no.

Persicaria: 16Lab, IOP, and 42Lab where Lewis works are all working to develop antivirus software and firewalls.

Persicaria: But this virus evolves by absorbing what it devours. Its form is unique in every Doll it infects.

Persicaria: Tailoring countermeasures for each individual would be an endless task.

Mayling: ...Unless we find the virus's origin, and reverse-engineer from there...

Persicaria: Heh, not bad. That's one possible approach.

Persicaria: And that's precisely what this device is for. The rest... Lewis will explain.

Lewis: Eh? Me...?

Persicaria: It's your job as the person responsible.

(Persica lifts her cup again, closes her eyes, and leaves the floor to Lewis.)

Lewis: Where should I start... Um... Commander, have you heard of the Magrasea Supercloud?

Commander: Magrasea... Supercloud? Sounds like some kind of high-end cloud storage service.

Lewis: That's not entirely wrong. Magrasea is a super-cloud server developed by 42Lab where I work.

Lewis: With a fee and a somewhat complicated application, governments, corporations, and even individuals can use it for data storage and processing.

Lewis: It also hosts 42Lab's core projects, including Project Neural Cloud, which is closely related to us Dolls.

Commander: Project Neural Cloud... Research and backup of Doll neural clouds, I see. It seems this project involves you too?

Persicaria: I was, in a sense, part of 42Lab's founding team. The name "Project Neural Cloud" came from me and another colleague.

Persicaria: Officially, 16Lab falls under 42Lab's umbrella, but it operates independently.

Commander: No wonder you're so invested. Sounds like something has gone wrong with Project Neural Cloud.

Lewis: Yes... The research concluded, and all data was supposedly sealed within Magrasea.

Lewis: But according to 42Lab's investigation, the virus appears to have originated from Magrasea Supercloud. Given its properties, it might even be directly tied to the Project Neural Cloud itself.

Lewis: 42Lab has debated on how to handle this incident, but their decision is leaning more toward resetting the servers and wiping all the infected data and neural clouds.

Commander: That's harsh.

Lewis: Indeed. But Miss Persica opposed this approach. She proposed entering the Cloud Server itself to collect the virus's source code and develop an antivirus.

Lewis: Unfortunately, few within 42Lab support that. Sending a Doll or AI into a den of infection is tantamount to suicide.

Lewis: Still, given the significance of the data within Magrasea... a full server reset hasn't been finalized either.

Commander: So that's what the consciousness-digitization rig is for. I see.

Commander: Instead of a Doll, you plan to send a human into virus-ridden Magrasea.

Persicaria: ...

Lewis: Human consciousness is more resilient than a Doll's neural cloud. Theoretically, it can resist infection for a short period.

Lewis: But that's all. They're only more resilient. If heavily infected, the consequences for a human could be worse than for a Doll.

Lewis: So, Commander... you have the right to refuse.

Commander: At our current pace, how long can Groza's squad hold out?

(My eyes shift to Miss Persica. Only she can provide the answer to a question like this.)

Persicaria: If they stay in hibernation, about three days. Otherwise... one at most.

Persicaria: After a single day, the virus will penetrate their base layer, and their neural cloud will be rewritten beyond recovery.

Mayling: Then... If that happens, Captain and the others will never come back...

Commander: ...

Persicaria: The choice is yours. The risk of this mission is extreme. If you refuse, I'll leave immediately and pursue another solution.

Commander: I...

Groza: ...I object.

(The powerless metal doors slam open with a harsh screech. Groza stumbles into the command room, her body weary and trembling, yet her gaze unwavering.)

Mayling: Captain! You shouldn't be moving right now!

Groza: I'll be fine...

Groza: Commander, I'm against you entering the Cloud.

Groza: You don't need to risk yourself for us. You have more important things right now...

Mayling: But if he doesn't, Captain, then you'll...

Groza: The Commander's safety is what matters most.

Commander: Miss Persica, I have another question.

Persicaria: Go on.

Commander: Why me?

Persicaria: The official answer is not every human qualifies to enter the Cloud. It requires extraordinary willpower and mental strength to have your consciousness digitized.

Persicaria: The unofficial answer is this isn't a mission from 42Lab or 16Lab. It's my personal request. I need someone I can trust.

Persicaria: Because I promised two dear friends... that I would protect Project Neural Cloud, and everything tied to Magrasea.

Persicaria: Of course, there's one more reason. I need someone capable of working alongside Lewis inside Magrasea.

Commander: Work with Lewis?

Persicaria: Lewis joined 42Lab and has certain privileges. For reasons I won't go into, she also has stronger resistance to the virus than most Dolls.

Persicaria: As her former superior, you'd be best suited to coordinate with her.

Lewis: H-huh? Um...

Commander: I understand.

Groza: Commander!

Commander: Given our current situation, what do you think will happen if we lose all the Dolls in the Yellow Zone?

Groza: But...

Commander: If I lose you all now, I'll end up with nothing. No strength, no allies, and not even the ability to evacuate with the Elmo.

Commander: If risk is inevitable, then I'll choose the option that best aligns with my principles.

Commander: Besides, you've prepared an adequate reward, haven't you, Miss Persica?

Persicaria: Of course.

Commander: Then I accept your commission.

Persicaria: Good.

Persicaria: Though this is a personal request, the Magrsea Supercloud is still monitored by 42Lab and IOP.

Persicaria: I don't need to tell you how sensitive your identity is.

Commander: To be watched by so many people, what an honor.

Persicaria: Which is why you'll need to enter the Cloud under a false identity.

Persicaria: You'll assume another's name, another persona, so they never discover you're the Commander.

Persicaria: As it happens, Lewis and I found an individual in the 42Lab database who shares your exact name.

Commander: My exact same name?

Persicaria: Yes. It's that uncanny.

Persicaria: Isn't that right, Lewis?

Lewis: Eh?! Uh... ah... yes, it's... quite the coincidence?

Commander: ...Is it really that much of a coincidence?

(Miss Persica ignores my muttered complaint and places a silver pin in my palm.)

Persicaria: This pin contains a forged signature code. With it, Magrsea will recognize you as someone else entirely.

Persicaria: But pay attention to how you speak and act...

Persicaria: From now on, you are the Professor.

Persicaria: The Professor of Project Neural Cloud.

The Chaotic Cloud

(In a data torrent woven from 0s and 1s, all forms distort into shards of unreality.)

(My body feels as if it's being torn apart and reassembled by an invisible force. My consciousness is adrift, wavering between its physical shell and the data stream.)

(Even the rhythm of my breathing becomes alien, as if forgotten at the edge of the void, beyond my control.)

Commander: So this is the world that Dolls perceive...?

Commander: Guh... This feeling... It's worse than any hangover.

Commander: That coffee-addict... She never told me I'd have to endure this...

(Just as I'm about to completely lose control of my body, a pair of warm hands suddenly grabs my arm.)

Lewis: Professor, Professor! Can you hear me?

Lewis: Don't think about how the data "breathes," don't worry about your body's structure, just leave it to your instincts!

(At Lewis's urgent call, I take a deep breath and force myself to calm down.)

(The tearing agony subsides like a receding tide, and the discomfort in my body has eased significantly.)

Commander: ...Phew... That's an experience I never want to go through again. My body still feels a bit sluggish. Looks like I'll have to get used to it slowly.

Commander: But Lewis, you don't seem affected at all?

Lewis: Well, my consciousness is data to begin with, so I don't need a conversion process.

Lewis: Besides... it's not my first upload. As a 42Lab administrator, I come and go between the two worlds all the time.

Commander: I see. What's it like, working at 42Lab?

Commander: I thought you would've gone back to being a toy designer after leaving Griffin.

Lewis: Eh? Haha... well, it's a bit different from what I expected, but I do still get to work on toy-related projects at 42Lab!

Lewis: And I haven't lost my skills as a designer! If you'd like, Professor, I can make you some new toys too.

Commander: Really? In that case, after this mission is over, I might need to trouble you to design some toys for a few kids.

Lewis: I'd be glad to!

System: Identity verified: 42Lab Professor — Robin.

System: Identity verified: 42Lab Doll Researcher — Lewis.

System: Autonomous defense protocols lifted. Welcome to the Magrsea Supercloud.

Commander: Oh? Looks like we're finally getting through this long tunnel.

Lewis: Your neursoul has mostly stabilized.

Lewis: At this rate, we'll enter the Magrsea Supercloud in three minutes.

(Lewis hesitates for a moment, then takes a deep breath and grasps my hand firmly.)

Lewis: Professor, please be careful. If things look bad, log out immediately and leave the rest to me.

Lewis: Humans do have resistance to the virus, but there are limits, so please don't push yourself!

Commander: Don't worry, I know my limits.

Lewis: You have to promise me! Your safety always comes first!

Commander: Roger that... Hm? What's that?

Lewis: Eh?

(Lewis and I both look towards the end of the channel. A bizarre purple light is surging towards us like a tide, consuming the previously orderly data stream.)

Lewis: A data turbulence?! Why would it appear at the end of the channel?! Professor, grab my hand!

(I do as Lewis says and grip her hand tightly, trying to use her strength to steady myself.)

(But just in an instant, the violent data turbulence sweeps over us, swallowing us whole.)

Commander: Ugh... this is... bad...

Lewis: Professor! Don't let go... Aah!

Commander: Lewis?! LEWIS!!!

(The intense turbulence tears us apart. I desperately reach out, trying to grab Lewis, but my hand only manages to touch the cold, fragmented data.)

(Her figure recedes into the distance amidst the purple torrent, until she disappears completely.)

Commander: Lewis! Where are you?!

(My vision is consumed by the ominous, deep purple data. Warped code continuously presses in on my neursoul, robbing me of my ability to move.)

Commander: Dammit... Miss Persica! Can you hear me?! Miss Persica!

Commander: Lewis! Answer me!

(My communicator gives nothing but a grating busy tone. Neither Persica nor Lewis responds to my calls.)

???: Who are you?

(An eerie voice breaks the dead silence, and a chill instantly envelops my heart.)

Commander: Who's there?!

???: Who are you? Why have you come to this place?

???: Are you... **him**?

(I try to pinpoint the source of the voice, but I can only struggle in vain within the endless data turbulence.)

(Lewis's voice has vanished without a trace. I can't even sense any other presence around me.)

???: Answer me. Who are you?

Commander: ...

Persicaria: This will be your identity once you enter the Cloud.

Persicaria: Never forget: you are the Professor now.

Commander: ...I am the Professor.

???: ...

(The void once again falls into a strange atmosphere, like the calm before a storm.)

(A sense of foreboding seizes my heart. I instinctively raise my arm, trying to fend off an unknown threat.)

???: Is that so... the Professor, is it?

???: Heheheheh... **AHAHAHAHAHAHA!** At last, I've found you...

???: Professor... welcome... to the world of data.

Commander: ?!

(Before I can react, the frenzied data torrent pounces on me like a great beast, dragging me down into a bottomless abyss.)

(My body is torn asunder and my consciousness shatters in the turbulence, as if my soul has been stripped from my body and plunged into an endless darkness.)

Commander: Shit... my body... won't move...

(The data torrent bombards my neurosoul as I'm gradually losing my sense of self.)

(My mind plunges into the void and my consciousness begins to blur, leaving me feeling lost and disoriented.)

Commander: I... have to... find an exit...

(Where's Lewis? Where does this channel end? Who am I?)

(In the raging tide of data, my consciousness ebbs and flows, sometimes clear, sometimes hazy, before finally sinking to the dark.)

(Just as I am about to be consumed by the turbulence, a familiar streak of pink light cuts through the darkness, enveloping me tightly.)

???: There you are... grab my hand!

(The voice is gentle and familiar, carrying the faint scent of coffee and warmth of spring.)

(Who could it be...?)

(Whoever it is, this is my last straw to grasp before I drown.)

???: I'm so glad to see you... Initiate Neural Cocoon.

Commander: Who... are you...

(My consciousness disconnects, as it sinks into an endless, tranquil slumber.)

...

(After an unknown amount of time, a soft touch begins to wake me from the darkness.)

???: 笑って♪抱きしめて♪

???: と言ってくれた君が傍にまだ居れるから♪

???: 僕は 花咲かせたマイグラの天に種を撒いて真実の蕾を♪

(The tender melody flows like a stream, awakening a strange sense of familiarity.)

Commander: This place is...

(I try to open my eyes, but all I see is darkness.)

???: Ah, you're awake... Please don't rush. Your visual module hasn't fully synchronized yet. Just a moment...

(A warm beam of light caresses my face, finally settling gently over my eyes.)

???: There. Now try opening them.

(I follow the voice's guidance and slowly open my eyes.)

(Light seeps in through the slivers of my vision, and the digital world gradually comes into focus.)

???: Can you see?

(The owner of the voice gently helps me to my feet. As I gradually adjust to the stinging light, my vision finally focuses.)

Commander: Thank you... Huh?

Commander: M-Miss Persica?!

Commander: No, you're not her... Who are you?



???: Pfft... Never thought I'd see you make a face like that.

(The pink-haired girl before me, both in appearance and style of dress, is the spitting image of the Miss Persica I know so well.)

(But from her good spirits, neat attire, and a noticeable difference in physique, I can confirm they're not the same person.)

???: If Miss Persica knew what you were thinking, she'd probably splash her coffee in your face.

???: ...A pleasure to meet you, Professor.

Persica: I am an AI Researcher Doll modeled after Miss Persica herself. My name is also Persica.

Persica: I'll be acting as your assistant to help you resolve this virus crisis.

Commander: A Doll designed by Persica... Your style is quite different from the other Dolls of hers I'm familiar with.

Persica: I am an early collaborative work between Miss Persica and another professor. I embody some of their... special philosophies.

Persica: And my primary field is also artificial intelligence research, so I am indeed a bit different from her other Dolls you've met.

Commander: She never told me about having another support in here.

Persica: I'm acting independently. Miss Persica is unaware of it.

Persica: But I believe this is the best option. After all, you are not a full-time researcher from 42Lab, and are not yet familiar with the Cloud's environment.

Commander: ...So you know who I am?

Persica: I only know that you're a trusted friend of Miss Persica.

Persica: And for me, that is enough.

(Bzzzt!)

(My communicator once again emits a piercing dial tone. While talking with this Doll who calls herself Persica, I'm trying to contact the real Miss Persica and Lewis, but neither has answered.)

Persica: The virus has been interfering with the channel since you entered the Cloud.

Persica: Communication between Magrsea and the outside world is completely cut off right now. I can't reach Miss Persica either.

Persica: Even the logout ports have been forcibly sealed by the virus.

Commander: ...

(I try the log-out procedure I was taught before entering the Cloud, but just as this Persica says, the system is not responding.)

Persica: I know it's hard to trust my words alone, but please believe me, Professor.

(The Doll who calls herself Persica takes my hand, her tone carrying an earnest plea.)

Commander: Although you look similar, your personality is quite different from Miss Persica's.

Commander: Maybe it's because you just saved me, or maybe it's because I have no other choice right now, or maybe it's just a gut feeling...

Commander: But [I'll be in your care, Persica.](#)

Persica: Yes! Thank you for your trust, Professor!

Commander: By the way, have you seen another Doll? Her name is Lewis.

Commander: Also, there seemed to be a strange voice in the channel earlier. Was that you?

Persica: Lewis... I didn't expect it to be her...

Persica: I'm sorry, but I haven't encountered either Lewis or the strange voice you mentioned. It was chaotic, and I only found you in the turbulence.

Persica: Given that the channel's exit was disrupted by the data turbulence, Lewis may have been sent to another sector.

Commander: Well, that's quite an unfortunate start.

Persica: Still, Lewis is very familiar with the Cloud, so she should be fine.

Persica: I'll be searching for her whereabouts while assisting you, so please don't worry.

Commander: Alright.

Commander: As for the virus investigation, do you have any suggestions?

Persica: Our first step is to determine the extent of the virus's threat and gather intelligence on the current state of Magraseda.

Persica: We have quite an opportunity right now. I'm detecting a large concentration of operands up ahead. It should be a nearby sector.

Persica: If we can question the agents there, we might uncover some clues about the virus.

Commander: Sector? What's that? And agents are...?

Persica: Sectors are the regional units that make up Magraseda Supercloud. Each sector stores data for corporations, groups, or even individuals. You can think of them as cities, each with its own cultural flavor.

Persica: As for agents, the term refers to all AI programs within Magraseda. Both artificial intelligences and Doll neursouls fall under the category of being an agent.

Persica: 42Lab cooperates with various companies to provide customized agents for each client leasing a sector, which are used for the management and research of the sector's data.

Commander: So they're essentially the natives of this world.

Persica: The sector ahead is the Rossum Sector.

Persica: However... The sector's operands reading are fluctuating abnormally. It seems to be under attack by the virus.

Persica: Mm... please wait a moment while I share the feed with you.

(Persica's fingertips tap lightly, and a moving image unfolds before me.)

(Grotesque violet creatures lash their tendrils wildly, tearing through the sector's structures as data fragments scatter like drifting ashes.)

(Agents flee desperately through the ruins, their cries of despair shattering the silence of the digital world.)

Agent A: Aagh! The firewall's been breached!

Agent B: Help! Somebody, please save us!

Agent C: My leg... it hurts... I can't move...

Agent A: Don't be afraid, I'll get you out!

Persica: The sector's firewall has been breached... If this continues, the agents there will be completely consumed.

Commander: ...

Commander: The tool Miss Persica gave me... it extracts data from the virus's corpse, correct?

Persica: Yes. The only safe way to retrieve its core data is by defeating the virus entities.

Persica: From a safety standpoint, we could look for a straggler...

Commander: In that case, there's only one thing to do.

(I check the sidearm at my hip. The cold weight of its metal feels real even here in Magraseda, bringing me a familiar presence that steadies my nerves.)

Commander: Persica, let's go.

Persica: Huh? Wait...

Persica: ...He's already on the move. But I suppose you never hesitate when it comes to things like this.

Persica: It's truly wonderful to be able to fight alongside you again, Professor.

...

Agent B: No, I can't leave you behind!

(The weak agent clutches her own damaged thigh, huddled amidst the ruins.)

(Her companion is desperately trying to rescue her, but is powerless against the collapsing giant wall of data, able to do nothing more than tug uselessly at the fragments.)

Entropic: Hissss...

Agent A: Aaah! H-help me!

Agent B: No... I have to fight... Ngh... My hands won't stop shaking... What should I do...

Agent B: Someone... please... save us...

Agent B: Somebody please help us!

(Bang!)

(Just as the grotesque violet creature raises its tentacle to tear the agent apart, my bullet accurately strikes the tip of its limb, sending a spray of distorted code fragments into the air.)

Entropic: Hiss!

Commander: Grab a weapon! Defend yourselves!

Agent B: Eh? Wh-what?!

Persica: ...Alsviðr.

(With her long sword in hand, Persica dashes forward. With one hand, she shields the agent, and with the other, she precisely cleaves the virus in two.)

(The purple mass disintegrates into countless fragments mid-air, turning to scattered specks of code that dissipate into the sector's atmosphere.)

Agent B: Eh... Eh?

Agent B: The monster... it's gone...

Commander: Everyone, tune into the public frequency!

Commander: Those injured but still able to move, head immediately to Point A1. There's currently no virus activity there!

Commander: Those unhurt, take up arms. Protect yourselves, and help your companions who cannot move.

Commander: Leave the Entropics to us!

(My commands spread through the public channel like surging signals, instantly injecting a sliver of order into the chaotic sector.)

(Some agents begin following my instructions, moving toward the designated rally point.)

(But many others remain paralyzed by fear.)

Commander: ...The agents in this sector... they all look like children...

Commander: And why do they have animal ears?

Persica: Those are their neursoul dampeners. They're devices designed to regulate and control their neursoul growth.

Agent A: Hah... Hah...

Persica: Are you alright?

Agent A: N-No... don't hurt me...

Persica: It's alright now. Here, take these operands.

(Persica kneels down, and a soft white light appears in her palm as a healing flow of operands streams into the agent's wound.)

(The light shimmers, and before our eyes the damaged thigh visibly reassembles. Code fragments stitch themselves back together, and the agent's expression shifts from pain to peace.)

Agent A: Those monsters... were so scary... Everyone... everyone was...

Persica: It's alright. It's over now.

Persica: What's your name?

Agent A: I-I'm H3061... W-Who are you?

Persica: We're here to help the Cloud. See him? This is the Professor of Project Neural Cloud.

Agent B: The Professor?! You're the Professor?!

(Under the child agent's wide, expectant gaze, I give a slight nod. A strange, heavy sense of responsibility has welled up inside me.)

Commander: ...Yes. I'm the Professor.

Agent B: T-Thank goodness! It's the Professor!

Agent B: Everyone! It's the Professor! The Professor of Project Neural Cloud!

(The public channel, which had been filled with despair, suddenly erupts with a powerful cry that spreads like a ripple.)

Agent C: The Professor Lewis-neechn told us about ?!

Agent D: It's the Professor! The Professor is here to help us!

Agent D: The Professor is here in Magrasea! Everyone, follow the Professor's command!

(The once-chaotic sector shifted in an instant.)

(Disorder gave way to coordination as the agents rally together. They began moving in formation, some even striking back at the scattered remnants of Entropics, turning fear into resolve.)

Commander: ...These agents...

Persica: Agents have always revered humanity, and to them, the Professor of 42Lab is nothing short of a legend within Magrasea.

Persica: And besides... your decisive charge into the sector just now spoke louder than words. You've already convinced quite a few of them with your actions.

Commander: I just didn't expect them to believe I was the Professor this quickly.

Persica: They've read your signature code. In the Cloud, one's signature code is the core basis for identifying things.

Persica: The agents are already evacuating to Point A1. There are five remaining Entropics. They seem to have noticed our movements and are now closing in on the crowd.

Commander: Then let's intercept them before they get close!

Persica: Okay.

(Persica and I move quickly, weaving through the shattered ruins of the sector.)

(I fire several shots into the sky. The operand trails from the bullets flash like signal flares, successfully attracting the Entropics' attention.)

Persica: They're on the move, in the block next to ours.

Persica: Two o'clock.

Commander: At this range, I can pierce straight through.

(With Persica guiding me, I quickly adapt to combat here in the Cloud.)

(Here, operands are used to simulate things from the real world, so both offense and defenses alike are tied directly to one's operands manipulation and reserves.)

Entropic: ?!

(Just as I anticipated, the bullet punched through the building's wall, piercing the Entropic behind it.)

Commander: That makes one left...

(As Persica effortlessly cuts down two more, I immediately begin to search for the last one's position.)

Entropic: Hiss...

Persica: Professor! Watch out!

(With her twin blades in hand, Persica quickly moves to shield me. With a loud crash, a pair of tentacles bursts through the wall and clashes violently with her blades, sending sparks flying.)

Commander: It's using the same tactic as me. Fall back!

(I pull the trigger, firing in rapid bursts to cover Persica's retreat.)

(Boom!)

(With another fierce assault, the wall dissolves into digital dust, revealing the Entropic's twisted body.)

Commander: This one is different from the others. It seems to have a certain level of intelligence.

Persica: The amount of data it contains is immense, so its behavior patterns are more complex.

Persica: Professor! Look out!

(The wall before us collapses under the continuous attacks. Persica grabs my lab coat just in time, pulling me away from the danger.)

(The virus's tentacle sweeps by like a whip, leaving a terrifying gash on the ground.)

Entropic: SHRIEEEKKKK!

(The tentacles lashed in a furious storm, forcing us to fall back step by step.)

Commander: Fast, fierce, and multi-point attacks all at once... as if the tentacles were firearms.

Commander: This feeling... It's strangely familiar.

(An odd sense of familiarity washes over me, causing my mind to wander.)

Commander: No, she can't be here in the Cloud. She's still with Frostfall Squad...

Commander: Persica, I'll draw its attention. Finish it with a killing blow!

Persica: Professor?!

Persica: Alright, stay safe.

(I quickly switched cover, using a tactical roll to dodge while pulling the trigger. A hail of bullets successfully draws the Entropic's attention.)

(The Entropic's body twists towards me, its tentacles coiling to its sides like springs.)

Persica: Professor! Dodge!

Commander: Tch! That was close!

(The Entropic's sharp tentacle grazes my cheek, leaving a thin cut. Operands immediately begin to leak from my wound.)

(But that momentary distraction was all it took to decide the battle.)

Entropic: Hiss?!

(The virus seems to sense something was wrong and turns rapidly, but Persica has already closed in like a ghost, placing her palm on its head as a stream of white operands begins to flow in reverse, injecting into the virus's core.)

Persica: Full-spectrum intrusion! Begin hack!

Entropic: SHRIEK!

(White operands surged from Persica's palm and the virus convulsed as if in agony.)

Persica: I'm sorry.

(With a flash of her blade, Persica's longsword precisely severed all of the Entropic's tentacles.)

(The Entropic's body was riddled with wounds. It could only collapse weakly to the ground, completely immobilized.)

Persica: Target incapacitated. Its data has not yet fully dispersed.

Persica: Professor, now's your chance.

(I quickly took out the instrument prepared by Miss Persica and inserted the data extraction needle into the Entropic's body.)

(The instrument whirled to life, and the virus's data was siphoned out like a liquid as the progress bar rapidly filled.)

Commander: Looks like Miss Persica's gear is working fine... Huh?

System: Virus analysis complete. Insufficient data.

System: Encrypted module detected... Decryption complete...

System: Experiment Serial No. SIC-012... Research on biohybrid body and biomimetic brain...

System: Research plan for artificial blood and artificial heart...

Commander: The Entropic's core is another dataset?

Commander: A biohybrid body and human-equivalent pain receptors... Why does this data feel so familiar?

(A stronger sense of familiarity washes over me, as if the virus isn't just a malicious code, but that one T-Doll who wields a shotgun.)

Commander: Who are you...? Why is your fighting style the same as hers?

Entropic: ...

Entropic: ...Professor... you're back... everyone's been missing you...

Entropic: ...Ugh... speaking... so formally... is really annoying...

Commander: Lind's voice?!

Entropic: ...It hurts... I can't move... this body is so inconvenient...

Entropic: ... hehe... but... it's fine...

Entropic: ...we'll... be able to see each other soon...

(The limp virus suddenly writhed, regenerating a tentacle and lashing out at me like a whip.)

(But Persica's longsword had already left her hand, pinning it to the ground. The blade drove deep into its core, ending the Entropic's life.)

Entropic: ...Per...sica... you're here too...

Entropic: ...Pro...fessor...

Persica: ...

Entropic: ...Hihihi...

(With its last ounce of strength, the Entropic lets out an eerie laugh before collapsing into purple dust.)

Persica: Target signal lost. Its data has fully dispersed.

Commander: ...

Commander: Looks like this mission won't be an easy one.

Interwoven Reality

Mayling: No, there's no response. Neither the Commander nor Miss Lewis are answering.

Persicaria: Even my own access has been locked out.

Persicaria: Has Magrasea become a black box again?

Persicaria: Leibniz, what's the situation on 42Lab's side?

Leibniz: They've also noticed the anomalies... The decoy you set up may not be able to hold much longer.

Leibniz: Perhaps calling off this mission would be the safer choice.

Persicaria: With our permissions locked, we can no longer force a log-out from the outside.

Mayling: Maybe if we cut the power...

Persicaria: Absolutely not!

Persicaria: If the pod malfunctions, the Commander's consciousness will never return to reality. He could be trapped inside Magraseda forever.

Mayling: That can't be... Then... then the Commander...

Persicaria: There's nothing more we can do now. I've tried every backup communication protocol and even resorted to 16Lab's emergency channels, but nothing has worked.

Persicaria: The interference inside Magraseda is far stronger than we anticipated... Perhaps the virus is strengthening itself.

Persicaria: The Commander's on his own. The only choice we have now is to believe in him.

(A heavy silence hangs in the command room as the red lights on the screen flash as rapidly as a heartbeat.)

Persicaria: Leibniz, stall 42Lab as long as you can.

Persicaria: Mayling, keep a constant watch on the Commander's vitals.

Persicaria: And contact Groza. Have her patrol the perimeter. I have a bad feeling about this...

...

Lewis: Professor! Please respond!

Lewis: Can you hear me? It's Lewis!

(No matter how many times Lewis calls out, the communicator only returns a dead, hollow silence, occasionally punctuated by the low hum of the data stream.)

Lewis: No good... Neither the Professor nor Miss Persica are answering...

Lewis: What happened at the channel? And why did I arrive off course from the designated entry point?

Lewis: And who's that guy who interfered with me in the channel...? And the virus too... ahhh, what should I do...

(The sudden turn of events makes Lewis extremely anxious. She paces back and forth in the null area, her hands clenched into fists as she tries to calm her chaotic thoughts.)

(Finally, she takes a deep breath, slaps her cheeks hard, and forces herself to calm down.)

Lewis: The Njörðr(?) Sector should be just ahead. If it's the Professor, he'll be gathering intel and trying to rendezvous with me.

**Never heard of it. OG line is 前面应该就是涅尔德扇区了*

Lewis: So all I need to do is follow the same steps as he would... Hm?

(Lewis slowly comes to a stop, staring at the sector before her in disbelief.)

Lewis: You've got to be kidding me... This is supposed to be the Njörðr Sector...



(The once-towering walls of the sector, that majestic barrier built from data bricks, are now torn open with a giant, deep crater, its edges jagged as if chewed by a great beast.)

(Purple entropic fluid seeps from the rupture. The remains of viruses are scattered everywhere, fragments of their twisted tentacles still twitching faintly.)

(Even more worrying are the agents collapsed all around. Their bodies are still like puppets with their strings cut, many with expressions of terror frozen on their faces.)

Lewis: Everyone!

(Lewis rushes forward, cautiously scanning her surroundings. She carefully navigates around the Entropics' remains, surveying the sector's ruined landscape.)

(The once-bustling data streets are now covered in cracks, the buildings have completely collapsed or are leaning precariously, and everywhere are the bodies of dormant or "dead" agents. The very air itself seems weighed down with an unbearable dread.)

Lewis: All their operands has been drained and their data consumed... Even their neursoul too...

Lewis: Can anyone hear me?!

Lewis: Please! Someone, anyone!

Child Agent: Lewis-neechn... y-you finally... came...

Lewis: Yes, I'm here. Don't be afraid. Neechan will find a way to save you.

Lewis: Here, let me see your injuries... Hang in there!

(Hearing a survivor, Lewis rushes to the child agent's side without hesitation.)

(She kneels beside the agent and gently lifts her broken body.)

(The child agent's lower half has been severely damaged, and her operand is steadily leaking from her wound.)

(Yet even now, the child agent is still clutching a worn-out toy doll.)

Child Agent: Nee...chan... this doll... protected me...

Child Agent: Hehe... Why... does it feel so cold...?

Child Agent: Huh... why can't I... lift my hand...?

Child Agent: Neechan... where are you...?

Child Agent: ... I... I can't... see you anymore...

Lewis: It's okay... Just close your eyes and rest for a little while.

Lewis: I'm here... I'll stay with you.

Lewis: Here, let me pass you some operands. Just hold on for me, alright?

(Lewis's hand gently brushes the dust and code fragments from the small agent's face as she injects a trickle of her own operand to stabilize her condition.)

(But that small amount is ultimately just a drop in the bucket. The child agent's signal grows weaker and weaker.)

Child Agent: ...When I wake up... will you show me... the new toys you invented, neechan...?

Child Agent: It's been so long... since you came... We all really want to see... your toys...

Child Agent: It's so cold... I'm so tired... Neechan... I...

(The child agent's hand goes limp, and she falls silent in Lewis's embrace.)

Lewis: Mm, I will... definitely.

Lewis: Sleep now... leave the rest to your big sis...

(Lewis picks up the toy doll from the ground and gently tucks it back into the child agent's arms.)

(She takes a deep breath, forcing back her tears, and turns her gaze toward the ruins of the sector.)

Lewis: ...Stop hiding. You may look different, but you're the same as those monsters.

Lewis: I know you're lurking in the entropic fluid! Come out!

(Glup.)

Entropic: Hissss...

(A sinister purple fluid seeps up from beneath the ground, writhing like a living thing.)

(Dozens of Entropics crawl out, their twisted tentacles whipping through the air as they close in on Lewis.)

(Their bodies flicker with eerie violet light, eyes burning with a hunger to consume Lewis's neursoul.)

Lewis: Now I'm really pissed off... I'll never, ever forgive you!

Lewis: For the sake of these children... for the sake of Magrasea... I won't let you harm anyone ever again!

...

Lewis: Haaah... hahh... who's next?!

(Lewis grips her light machine gun tight. The muzzle spits blazing tongues of fire, bullets raining down like a storm.)

(The encroaching horde screeches in fury, their tentacles thrashing wildly, desperate to tear through Lewis's defense.)

(But Lewis moves even faster. Sidestepping a strike, she counters with a sweeping burst, shredding the nearest Entropic into pieces.)

(Purple entropic fluid splashes across the ground, corroding the sector's floor as the stench of data corruption fills the air.)

Lewis: Ow, I still got grazed...

Lewis: No good. At this rate, I'll have no time to collect data from the virus.

Lewis: And there are far too many of them...

(Lewis grits her teeth. The continuous fighting is draining her operand reserves faster than expected.)

(But neither her emotions nor her logic will allow her to retreat.)

Lewis: None of you are getting away!

(Lewis once again expertly dodges a tentacle's attack and grabs hold of it.)

Lewis: If the drain is too heavy, then no more guns for now!

Lewis: Don't underestimate a toy designer's strength!

Entropic: ?!

(Lewis heaves, swinging a man-sized Entropic like a hammer throw.)

Entropic: Skreeeee!

(The thrown Entropic slams heavily into the swarm, causing a moment of chaos.)

Lewis: Neursoul limiters released! I'll end this ASAP!

(What follows can hardly be called a "battle." Lewis tears through the horde with reckless ferocity.)

Lewis: That should be all of them...

(Panting, Lewis surveys the area. The Entropics lie broken. A few twitch weakly, their tentacles feebly writhing as they let out faint static cries.)

Lewis: So it's over... ngh... that hurts... at least my ammo's still good.

Lewis: Now, if I can collect enough data from them, we can accelerate antivirus development.

Lewis: The Professor's still waiting. I have to hurry.

Lewis: Alright... let's start with you...

(Lewis bends down to the nearest carcass, pulling out the collection device Persica had given her, ready to drive it into the Entropic's remains.)

Entropic: Skree... skree...

Lewis: Hm? Just now... I thought I heard...

Entropic: ...Hss... hisss... ¥%..#&...

Entropic: Le... Le... Lewis...

Lewis: ?!

(Lewis stumbles back, nearly dropping the device from her hands.)

(The screeches grow sharper, clearer, eerily familiar.)

Entropic: Lewis... you're back...

Lewis: A low-level Entropic... can speak?

(The screeches grow clearer, no longer just a hiss, but a distorted, echo-laden call.)

(Lewis's thoughts blur. The voices twist in her ears, morphing into a gloomy, lazy, introverted tone she knows too well.)

Entropic: Everyone's been waiting for you to come back...

Entropic: I've been waiting too... the latest Armored Cre model... design one for me, Lewis...

Lewis: Armored Cre...?! No, this voice... It's Croque's?!

(Lewis's eyes widen as she stares at the Entropic. But the thing is incapacitated. Then where is this voice coming from?)

Entropic: Yo, Lewis. You're back.

Entropic: Wanna go explore the next sector? There's a new discovery there...

Lewis: Sol...

Entropic: Firewall established. Retrieving, searching...

Entropic: Lewis, do you need my help analyzing the Entropic's data?

Lewis: Y-You guys... what's going on...

Lewis: No... impossible... how could you...

(Lewis's voice trembles. She stumbles back a few steps, her gaze sweeping over the dissipating Entropics on the ground.)

(The remains of the Entropics begin to distort before her eyes, eventually taking the form of a person.)

Entropic: Huh? Lewis, why are you just standing there?

Entropic: Everyone's been waiting for you. Come, let's rebuild Magrsea together...

Lewis: Y-You're... impossible... Professor?! No... no, that's impossible... What the hell are you?!

Entropic: There's no such thing as impossible.

Entropic: Come, Lewis... we're all here, waiting for you...

(FWOOM!)

(A lance of deep violet light erupts from the shadows, piercing Lewis straight through her chest.)

(Her body convulses violently under the searing pain as her vision begins to blur.)

Lewis: Ack... I... this is...

Lewis: Why... does it hurt so much...

Trail of Doubts

Persica: Professor, we still have about thirty minutes to the target location. Let's rest here for a bit.

Persica: Although we are digital consciousness here in Magrsea and aren't constrained by physical stamina, the feeling of fatigue still exists.

Commander: Phew... you're right. Let's take a breather here.

Commander: We'll continue in ten minutes. If the operand surge ahead really was caused by a battle...

Commander: Then it's likely either Lewis is fighting... or a sector has come under Entropic invasion.

Persica: Either way, we'll need to be in top condition.

Persica: Here, try this. It's a hazelnut maple coffee chocolate made from operands. It helps with recovery.

(Persica offers me a neatly wrapped chocolate, its packaging adorned with an elegant "Choco" logo.)

Commander: Choco... is that the name of the brand? Reminds me of a Doll I know who adores chocolate.

(I take a bite. The aroma of chocolate and roasted coffee beans blossoms in my mouth, instantly awakening my taste buds, like a warm stream of energy flowing into my neursoul.)

(But then, a cloying sweetness, sharp as saccharine, overwhelms the flavor, making me frown, yet it feels strangely familiar.)

Commander: This sweetness... You're definitely one of Miss Persica's Dolls.

Persica: Haha... I'm actually more restrained compared to Miss Persica.

Persica: Although... She's recently started adding ten more sugar cubes to her coffee...

Persica: But the taste isn't what's most important. What matters is the operands it contains, which can quickly repair minor wear and tear on your neursoul.

Commander: It's certainly effective. Thank you, Persica.

(I roll my shoulders and stretch my arms. Just as Persica said, the previous feeling of heaviness is completely gone.)

Persica: It seemed like something was on your mind on the way here. Is it because of that device the children gave you when we left?

Persica: Or is it the worsening state of Magrasea that weighs on you?

Commander: ...You really are different from Miss Persica.

Commander: If it were her, she wouldn't have cared even if she noticed.

Persica: Uh... Miss Persica simply isn't good at expressing herself.

(Watching Persica defend the other Persica so earnestly brings an involuntary smile to my lips.)

Commander: As you said, both Magrasea's situation and what those children entrusted me with are weighing on my mind.

Commander: But what concerns me most... is the data inside this device.

(I take out the small terminal the little agents gave me before leaving Rossum Sector. A blue protective shimmer covers its surface, holding their precious research data safe within.)

Child Agent H3061: Professor, Professor! These are our research data!

Child Agent H3061: The Entropics never touched it! It's completely safe!

Commander: Why entrust these to me?

Child Agent H3061: If you can take it out of here, our mission will be fulfilled.

Child Agent H3061: Right now, only Rossum still has agents left, but our operand reserves won't last much longer.

Commander: It's not time to give up yet. If you can rally your defenses, you can still hold against the Entropics.

Child Agent H3061: Mm, we won't give up, but if Magrasea really is consumed by the virus, as long as you can get this data out, Professor, our research can help future agents continue the work.

Child Agent H3061: After all, the research we started with came from data left behind by other agents in a past crisis.

Child Agent H3061: So please, Professor! Take this with you!

Child Agent H3061: Hehe... maybe someday, our work will help even more people!

Commander: Persica... what exactly is Magrasea and Project Neural Cloud?

Commander: I always thought it was simply a research project on neural clouds backup. But both the Entropy and these children's data raise questions I can't ignore.

(I activate the device's information terminal, and a dense screen of scientific data fills the entire view.)

(The reports trace back to multiple neural cloud prototypes, detailing various experimental specifics, with charts and code interwoven into a complex network.)

Commander: Analysis of the Neural Cloud Separation Between Security 2.0 Mass-Production Cat-Style Home Security Dolls and Robo-Cats. Research Report on the Linguistic Abilities of CM.SL Streamer Dolls.

Commander: Repair Report on the Neural Cloud Disorder of the Butler-36 Maid Doll, and Overload Report on the Neursoul Dampeners of the Caregiver T55 Child-Care Doll.

Commander: I've never seen these reports before, but the Dolls themselves are no strangers to me.

Commander: But as far as I knew... none of them ever told me anything about Project Neural Cloud.

Persica: ...How are those Dolls now?

Commander: Because of certain circumstances in reality, many of us were separated.

Commander: Some, however, braved every obstacle to reunite with me.

Commander: And as for the ones I haven't met again, I believe we will be reunited in the future.

Persica: I see. That's really good to hear.

Persica: You're right. The Dolls you know did participate in Project Neural Cloud, likely before you knew them as they are now.

Persica: The purpose of Project Neural Cloud was to create cloud backups of A-Dolls' data, so that even if their physical bodies were damaged, their data could be preserved, minimizing losses.

Persica: However, something went wrong during the project. A large portion of the data mysteriously vanished. That incident was named the Wipe-off Incident by 42Lab.

Commander: Vanished? Then what about this Magrasea?

Persica: By chance, with Miss Persica's help, 42Lab recovered fragments of the missing data and rebuilt Magrasea.

Persica: However, the original agent and Dolls remained unaccounted for.

Commander: Unaccounted for... stolen, perhaps?

Persica: ...42Lab has no definitive conclusion yet.

Persica: To investigate, they even recalled Dolls who took part in the project. But since the data was lost after uploading, theoretically those Dolls know nothing of what transpired.

(Just as Persica is about to explain further, her expression shifts. Her gaze darts around alertly as the silence of Magrasea is broken by a discordant, low hum.)

Persica: ...Looks like we've stayed here for too long.

(Glup...)

(Purple liquid creeps across the ground, writhing like a living tide at our feet. The floor trembles faintly.)

(One by one, dark violet Entropics emerge, tentacles writhing, their eyes glowing red with hunger.)

(There aren't many of them, but they're scattered, trying to surround us from all sides.)

Commander: Fighting them in an open area like this is too disadvantageous for us. Let's not get bogged down in a fight.

Persica: Okay! Please stay behind me!

...

Lewis: This place is...

Lewis: I remember being attacked by Entropics...

?: Ah! It's Lewis, what are you doing here?

Lewis: That voice is... Jiangyu?!

Jiangyu: Persica's calling everyone to gather! She said there's something important to announce!

Jiangyu: Big Sis and the others have already left. Come on, let's go!

(Without giving her any chance to refuse, Jiangyu seizes her arm and pulls her toward the distant glow ahead.)

(As the light grows nearer, the darkness around her fades, and at last she can see where she is.)

Lewis: Oasis... Everyone...

Lewis: I remember now. It's that day.

Persica: To everyone in Oasis... and all of Magraseda. I have an announcement to make today.

Persica: Starting today, I need everyone to organize their research projects and data. We will be archiving all of this data.

Persica: Once the data archival is complete, Magraseda will execute a second Wipe-Off Incident

Persica: This plan was created together with the Professor, with representatives from the Exiles, the Greater Sanctifiers, the Sector Administrators, and the Guardians.

Persica: I know this is a painful decision... but it is the best choice we have.

Lewis: ...

(Onstage, Persica's words ripple through the crowd like a storm.)

(Dolls, Agents, and even Sanctifiers... Though everyone has braced themselves for this day, acceptance does not come easily when the moment finally arrives.)

Lind: So it still comes to this in the end. Still, it really is the best option.

Centauressi: The Second Wipe-Off Incident... This will decide the fate of Magrasea.

Centauressi: It's time to say goodbye to this place.

Florence: My, my... looks like I'd better hurry and record the formula I developed with Panakeia and the others.

Florence: Hmm, and there are a few other plans I need to bring to my other self.

Jiangyu: But hey, we get to return to reality! I wonder if the me in reality is also with Big Sis...

Daiyan: Even if we aren't together in the real world, the bond between us will never be broken.

Ksenia: Haha, I'll have to come and visit you all then!

(The familiar voices of her companions brim with joy, brimming with dreams of the lives awaiting them in reality.)

Kuro: Kekeke! Rejoice, my dear fans! The greatest streamer in history is about to make her return!

Betty: I think all your fans have probably disappeared, Kuro-nyan.

Abigail: She's not wrong about that.

Kuro: What did you say?!

Souchun: Ara ara... let's not get too rowdy now.

(Yet despite the laughter, there is one truth they all avoid speaking aloud...)

Lewis: ...Is this really the right thing to do?

Jiangyu: Lewis?

Lewis: Only we get to return to the real world. Just because our identities are “special”...

Lewis: But what about Persica and the others?

Daiyan: ...Lewis, that's because...

Lewis: I know. Because we have to return to the real world. It's a mission only we can complete!

Lewis: But Angela and Imhotep still have their dreams. And Xinghuan and Earhart's research is still needed by the world...

Lewis: And Persica, Anna, Sol, and Croque... They, too, wish to be by his side...

Lewis: Yet only we are given the opportunity... is that really okay?

(Even now, she still remembers the question she asked that day.)

(They were deemed special. And because of that, a different mission awaited them, one that only they could fulfill.)

(Because... the “us” in the other world are...)

?????: Because you're what?

Lewis: You... who are you?

?????: It's not fair, is it?

(A deep and familiar voice, like a whisper, coils around her neuronsoul.)

(The scene in the plaza begins to distort. The sunlight dims, and a purple shadow appears at the edge of the distant Oasis.)

Lewis: No... what I mean is...

?????: Isn't it true? You'll still be able to see the ones most precious to you... in reality.

?????: Even if you're apart, you still exist in the same world.

?????: But what about the Dolls and agents exiled to this virtual world? They've already been forgotten, reduced to nothing but drifting data dust.

Lewis: I...

?????: You know it's wrong.

?????: Especially after you became a 42Lab researcher and came to the Cloud again and again, all alone.

?????: Ten years have passed, and still, you've never been with him. All those lonely days, all those promises left unfulfilled...

?????: Are you really that special? Is that specialness worth abandoning everything in the Cloud?

Lewis: No! That's not it!

?????: This so-called Second Wipe-Off is nothing but a mistake. It's not protection; it is betrayal.

Lewis: It is to protect! To protect everyone in the Cloud, and to protect him in reality!

?????: Protect? Look at his current state. Do you dare say you've protected him well?

Lewis: No... No... that's not...

Lewis: No... No.... It's not like that!

Lewis: I... we're...

?????: Stop struggling. Admit it.

?????: Only here can he find his true place.

?????: No wars, no rulers, no oppression... Just a Magrsea that exists for him alone. A perfect utopia.

(The voice seeps into her head like a curse. The faces around her blur, and her friends' warm smiles twist into grotesque shadows.)

(Memories surge like a flood. The pain of parting, the weight of dreams undone, the crushing burden of promises never kept presses down upon her very soul.)

Lewis: ...

?????: Come now. Join me. Let's keep him here.

Lewis: Keep... him... here...?

?????: That's right, Lewis. Join me.

Lewis: You've been reading my memories! That's why the faces of everyone you showed me were different from how they truly were!

Lewis: You're an Entropic!

?????: ...Good grief. And here I thought you'd never catch on.

?????: If only you'd stayed as foolish as the data described you to be... Lewis.

Lewis: Eh?

(Before she can react, a blade-like tendril has already pierced her chest.)

(Pain surges through her like electricity. Her vision blurs, and the illusion of Oasis crumbles, dissolving into a void of seething violet.)

?????: A pity... you never did tell me what made you "special."

?????: But no matter. He has already entered Magrasea.

?????: ...Rest easy. Leave the Professor to me. Very soon... you will all be reunited.

The Tomb of Steel

Commander: I didn't expect the plan to go off the rails like this. I was originally just trying to break through, but we ended up being forced to take such a massive detour.

Commander: Is this the sector where we detected the combat signals earlier?

Persica: Yes... but it feels unnervingly quiet.

Persica: I'm not sensing any agents or Entropics signature.

Commander: Strange. We were ambushed by a swarm of them not ten minutes out from here, and yet there's no sign of any of them here.

Commander: Stay alert, Persica. Let's keep moving.

Persica: Okay.

(Steel-clad structures loom like silent giants, exuding a cold metallic breath. There's no trace of life within these ruins.)

(And yet, their surfaces bear countless scars of battle.)

Commander: These marks... they weren't left by the Entropics. They're too uniform, it's more like something left by human weaponry.

(I run my hand over a bullet hole in the sector wall. These indentations have been here for a long time.)

(Even up close, there's no smell of gunpowder, only the old, metallic scent of rust.)

Persica: I've scanned the area, and there don't seem to be any traces of Entropics activity either.

Persica: But likewise... I can't find any traces of agents either. I'm trying to access the sector's database, though it will take some time.

Commander: Let's check the center area. Stay sharp, I have a bad feeling about this.

(We follow the steel-paved avenues deeper in, but still find no signs of life along the way.)

(All we can see are the scars left by various crossbows and bullets etched into this sector, as if no one has ever lived here.)

(But the deeper we go, the more I see things that shouldn't belong in this place.)

Commander: Why are these things here...?!

(At the sector's heart are rows of war machines of every sort.)

(I've seen these things before.)

Commander: Dinergates... Cyclops... Dummies... Typhon... even T-Doll imprint weaponry...

Commander: Now I know what this sector was researching.

Persica: ...The Military Industry Sector: Cyclopes, established under Svarog Heavy Industries, dedicated to weapons R&D.

Persica: When its original project was terminated, the sector became a repository for past military research.

(At last, Persica breaks through the sector's firewall, drawing forth archived data from the sector's database.)

Commander: Not just government military tech, but even technology from bounty hunters and the Varjagers too.

Commander: Huh... They even logged those encounters.

(Seeing the combat data between the Elmo and the Varjagers displayed on the screen, I can't help but frown.)

(And not just the Elmo's. Data spanning battles from as far back as 2060 are collected here.)

(Combat evaluations, tactical analyses... seeing my own past marked with all sorts of labels by others fills me with a sense of disgust.)

Persica: You seem rather displeased with the subject of this sector's research.

Commander: No... it's just that I don't think this data is all that worthy of being studied.

Commander: Especially since this data involves too many people who shouldn't have been involved.

Commander: And on these reports they're just cold entries. Not even their names are left behind.

(I have no intention of telling Persica what's truly on my mind, but I subconsciously reveal a sliver of my frustration.)

(And Persica, perceptive as ever, seems to have keenly picked up on it.)

Persica: Data is just data. They're recorded moments, which can no longer be changed.

Persica: But studying this data and applying it to the future is a direction the agents here have always been researching.

(Persica presents a new set of data before me.)

Persica: If you are not interested in military-related data, you can take a look at these.

Persica: These are research that leans more towards civilian applications. Perhaps it can alleviate some of your dissatisfaction.

Commander: ...Hmm? Emergency rescue Doll development records?

Commander: A new line of rescue Dolls, derived from the FF-Alpha firefighting units and SRT-8 emergency responders...

Commander: Components forged entirely from heat-resistant materials. Systems hardened against humidity and searing heat. Designed to function in flood or fire, without shorting out or crashing.

Commander: Designation... Pavlina?!

**literally who*

(A familiar name has appeared once again, and the image of that small but unyielding red-haired Doll rises in my mind.)

Persica: Another Doll you know?

Commander: Yes... though this time it's different. Before, the ones I recognized were the test subjects. This time, it's the finished result.

Commander: She rarely talked about her rescue-team days, and most Dolls of her type have long since left the frontlines.

Commander: But as far as I know, her data was used as a reference for the next-generation rescue Dolls.

Commander: Wait, there's even a report on combat medic Dolls here... Huh? This signature...?!

Persica: Signature? Let me see... Ah...

Persica: UL-Nurse. Her methods are somewhat aggressive, and her neurosoul exhibited some... unexpected behavioral traits.

Persica: But she's nonetheless great. Her neurosoul sample and technical data have been chosen as a reference for the next generation of combat medic Dolls.

Commander: "Somewhat aggressive," huh?

Commander: Still... if later models were developed from her data, that would explain a lot.

Commander: Compared to her, the new combat medic Dolls are certainly much more docile.

Persica: Sounds like a lot has happened around you.

Persica: You seem calmer now.

Commander: Compared to those cold, lifeless military records, these civilian-focused files are a relief. It's good to know the Cloud has research that isn't all war and power struggles.

Commander: Medical tech, materials, industry, rescue, even though this is a military-industrial sector, its scope is surprisingly broad.

Commander: But... where did all the agents here go? I didn't find any trace of Entropy attacks in the database.

Commander: Even if its original project were abandoned, this place shouldn't be completely empty.

Persica: Either they evacuated before the Entropy appeared, or they were overrun in an instant.

Persica: But neither fits what we've seen so far.

Persica: The real question is, who exactly fought here?

(Just as Persica says, we'd followed readings of combat signatures to this very spot, only to find not the faintest sign of battle.)

Commander: Can you pinpoint the exact location of the battle?

Persica: I'm trying... Hm? Professor, I've located a Doll's signature.

Persica: It seems to be... Lewis!

Commander: Let's go!

(Passing through the towering steel buildings, we arrive at the sector's core and find a massive plaza that is completely at odds with the sector's industrial style.)

(And at its center, stands a massive monument.)

Commander: ...A monument?

(I step closer and read the inscription carved into the stone.)

Commander: "Tasha"... is that the name of the person this monument commemorates? There's another name too, "Simo"...

Commander: "To remember the pain of Cyclopes, and to never again repeat the cycle of bloodshed."

Persica: ...

(I look around the monument. The solemn, heavy structure is surrounded by [all sorts of flowers](#).)

(These flowers don't seem to be truly simulated ones; there are even some made of metal and paper. The wide variety of styles adds a different atmosphere to the serious plaza.)

(And in the sea of flowers behind the monument, we see a familiar figure.)

Persica: It's Lewis!

(Persica hurries forward and helps the unconscious Lewis up.)

(She lies amid the flowers, pallid, her neurosoul responses weak.)

Persica: There's static in her neurosoul... and there are traces of virus erosion too.

Persica: There's a penetrating wound as well. I'll stabilize her.

Commander: ...

Persica: Professor?

Commander: We followed signs of battle to this sector, but the database contains no virus logs and no battle records.

Commander: And now, Lewis appeared in the flowerbed by the monument, but aside from the trail we made coming here, there's no trace of Lewis having been here.

Persica: ...!

(Persica instantly switches to a combat stance, drawing her long sword and shielding Lewis and me behind her.)

(The direction we came from is now covered in a malevolent purple.)

(Countless tentacles slowly emerge from the Entropic fluid. Entropics surge forth like a tide, their shrieks echoing across the plaza. Even the air instantly becomes thick and oppressive.)

Commander: To think that even I, who's using a fake signature code to pose as the Professor, would be deceived by the same trick...

Persica: Professor, please give your orders.

Commander: We'll try to create an opening and break through. But first, I need you to hold them back.

Persica: Understood. Leave it to me.

...

(An endless swarm of Entropics are gradually closing in on the monument, surging towards us like a tide.)

(Purple tentacles squirm across the plaza, and the sour sting of data corrosion fills the air.)

Persica: Professor, at this rate, I can only hold out for another fifteen minutes.

Commander: The enemy's numbers in the direction we came from are fewer than expected, but considering that trap we just ran into...

Commander: Persica, break through in the direction of the Rossum Sector! Conserve your operands and wait for my signal.

Persica: Copy that.

(After seeing the direction of our breakout attempt, the Entropics surrounding us immediately move as I have anticipated.)

(They squirm like living creatures, their tentacles weaving into a net, closing in on us rapidly from both sides.)

(The previously wide-open escape route is instantly filled. The Entropics emerge from the ground like a wall, blocking all visible paths.)

Commander: It really is a trap, but it's perfect!

Commander: Now, Persica!

Persica: Linear Fission... Calibrating. Focusing all operand...

(A pink arrow of light materializes in Persica's hands. Operands gather like a storm, and the resulting shockwave startles the Entropics, even forcing them to recoil a few steps back.)

(Sensing the threat, the Entropics quickly gather on our escape route, layering on top of each other to form a living barrier, attempting to block the attack with their bodies.)

Persica: Mm, just as I thought.

(Persica abruptly changes her aim and fires the arrow in the opposite direction.)

(The powerful impact explodes like a pink storm. The arrow splinters into countless beams of light, heading straight for the Entropics' weak flank.)

(The Entropics are shattered under the operand beams, dissolving into the air.)

(The opening created by their change in formation is finally widened enough to create an escape route for us.)

Commander: Fall back!

(Supporting Lewis, I dash into the opening and flee along the breakout route.)

(Glup.)

?????: ...They escaped? I suppose an encirclement of this level is useless against him.

?????: But no matter. Our reunion has only just begun.

?????: Hehehe... I'll be waiting for you... Professor...

Neon Zither's Song

System: Neursoul synchronization at 90%...

System: Neural Cloud fusion at 100%...

System: Self-diagnostic complete. Neural Cloud instability rate below 5%...

Persicaria: Looks like the procedure worked well. How do you feel, Lewis?

Lewis: Miss Persica? Ugh... my neural cloud feels... strange.

Persicaria: That's a normal reaction. Your neural cloud is now carrying two sets of memories.

Persicaria: You'll need time to process and adapt, but since both are essentially yours, there shouldn't be any rejection.

Persicaria: How long it takes varies by individual. Jiangyu was perfectly fine once her self-check was complete, while Lind locked herself in her room and devoured lollipops nonstop for a week.

Lewis: Griffin... How is Griffin now?

Persicaria: ...Helian delivered your letter of intent. Whether you stay in Griffin or look for something new is up to you.

Persicaria: UAS also sent you an invitation. They hope you'll continue your work as a toy designer.

Lewis: Toy designer... T-Doll...

Lewis: Miss Persica, what about Magraseda? And the Professor?

Persicaria: Just as planned, Magraseda is still in exile. It's been, let's see, over a year, I think.

Persicaria: As for that guy you care so much about... it's better not to disturb him for now. Remembering those things would only hurt him.

Lewis: ...

Persicaria: ...You don't seem satisfied with this outcome.

Lewis: He... He gave so much for us, and this is how it ends...

Lewis: Griffin... Magraseda... Surely he deserved something better! Why did it have to be like this?

System: Neural cloud instability rate rising. Warning! Warning!

Lewis: Ugh...

Lewis: Why does it have to end like this? I never wanted to leave Griffin... or Magraseda...

Lewis: None of us did... none of us...

Lewis: Miss Persica... I...

Persicaria: We can't turn back time, but we can move forward into the future.

Persicaria: I have another job for you, one that might allow you to move toward the future you wish for.

Lewis: ...Huh?! This data terminal has the data everyone archived... Could it be...?

Persicaria: Lewis, what's your choice?

Lewis: I...

Lewis: I want to be with the Professor forever...

...

Lewis: Uwahhh!

Commander: Lewis? Are you alright?

Lewis: Eh, P-Professor? This isn't... a dream, is it?

Commander: Whew... seeing you flail like that, I thought your neursoul had glitched.

Commander: Take it easy. Your injuries aren't light, and Persica could only stabilize you for now.

Lewis: I'm fine... Huh? Professor, what did you just say?

(As if just now realizing there is a third person present, Lewis looks behind her.)

(Her gaze shifts from confusion to shock, and her breathing instantly becomes rapid.)

Persica: Long time no see, Lewis.

Lewis: P-Persica... is it really you?

Lewis: Y-You're not an Entropic illusion, are you?

(Lewis's eyes widen, as if she's afraid the scene before her will vanish like a soap bubble if she blinks.)

(Her fingers tremble slightly. She reaches out and then pulls back, her face a mixture of joy, fear, and disbelief.)

Lewis: The Professor and Persica are both here... It really is Persica and the Professor!

Lewis: ...Waaaaahhh! Persica!!

Lewis: Why... Why did things turn out this way?!

Persica: I'm sorry. These ten years must've been so hard for you.

(Persica gently embraces Lewis, and a warm stream of operands flows from her palm, softly and warmly soothing her emotions.)

Lewis: I really, really missed everyone so much... Griffin is gone... Oasis is gone... but I knew I had to keep moving forward.

Lewis: So I went to 42Lab... but it was so lonely... All I could do was pore over the data everyone left behind...

Lewis: Bwehhhhh...

(After some time, Lewis finally regains her composure.)

(She wipes the tears from her cheeks, inhales deeply, and tries to steady herself.)

Lewis: Sob... why won't my emotional module stay under control... P-Professor, I probably look terrible right now. So please, don't look at me...

Commander: Hm?

Commander: I feel like I've heard that line somewhere before.

Persica: The instability in your emotional module stems from the virus inside you. Although the effects are still minor, it's already begun to affect the functions of your various modules.

Lewis: Then can you just, you know, swoosh swoosh, and remove the virus for me, Persica? Now that you're—sob... no, I can't say it.

Persica: I'm sorry, but I'm afraid not. Even if I were to use those abilities, I couldn't resolve the situation you're trying to solve.

Persica: For now, it's best that we proceed with Miss Persica's plan.

Lewis: Sonna...

Commander: Lewis, tell us what happened to you first. How exactly did the virus get to you?

Commander: Judging from your reaction when you woke up, it seems you went through something terrible.

Lewis: Ah, right.

(Lewis recounts everything she has experienced in detail, from the illusions to the ambush.)

Commander: And the Entropic that ambushed you at the end, did you see what it looked like?

Lewis: No... no, I didn't...

Commander: The Entropic can mimic the appearance of the participants of Project Neural Cloud and even hack their neursouls and read their data...

Commander: Now those are some troublesome abilities.

(I look at the virus extraction device in my hand. The progress bar is only at 50%.)

Commander: We didn't have the luxury of collecting data when we were escaping Cyclopes. It seems we'll have to figure out a way to do it here.

Lewis: Professor, the current situation here in the Cloud is vastly different from what Miss Persica and I had anticipated.

Lewis: So... I think you should return first, back to the Rossum Sector where you passed earlier.

Lewis: That sector is relatively safe for now. Leave the mission to me. I'll find a way.

Commander: Do you really think I'd leave you alone in such a dangerous area? Especially when you're already infected?

Lewis: Professor!

Commander: Don't push yourself too hard. You haven't recovered yet.

(I reach out and pat Lewis's head, trying my best to offer a reassuring smile.)

Commander: If things get dangerous, I promise I'll take care of myself.

Lewis: Ugh... coming from you, Professor, that sounds no different from "I'm definitely going to do something reckless"!

Persica: Hehe, don't worry, I'll help keep the Professor safe.

(Zheng.)

(A piercing zither note tears through the air around us, forcing us to cover our ears in pain.)

Commander: Tch... these Entropics really don't play by the rules, do they...

Commander: Can we just switch off our hearing modules for this?

Lewis: A zither's sound? D-Don't tell me...!

Commander: Time to test my hunch.

Commander: Lewis, Persica, prepare for combat!

Lewis: Alright!

Persica: Lewis's neursoul is still affected by the virus. Let me take the vanguard.

Commander: No, Persica. This time, I need you to head here.

Commander: If it's really as I suspect, then we'll need to set up some defenses in advance.

Commander: Can I count on you?

Persica: Of course.

...

(A storm of bullets rains down through the city's streets, sweeping away the Entropics that plague this place. The suppressive fire from Lewis's LMG, different from my and Persica's attacks, manages to hold back the large number of enemies.)

(The opening it has made also makes it easier for Persica and me to execute more flexible tactics.)

Commander: Lewis! Eleven o'clock!

Lewis: Got it!

(Lewis quickly changes magazines and continues to pour fire on the target location. The bullets flow like a stream of iron, trying to shred the approaching Entropics.)

Entropic: Hiss!!!

(Several Entropics are torn to shreds by Lewis's bullets, but one of them nimbly weaves through the bullet rain.)

Lewis: You're not getting away!

(Lewis aims her weapon at the Entropic that has broken through the line again, but its movements are as graceful as a dancer's. With a nimble dodge, it completely escapes her field of fire.)

Commander: They're tougher than I thought. Shift to three o'clock, now!

Lewis: Leave it to me!

(Lewis takes out a new magazine to cover our retreat, but the Entropic rushes before her like a phantom.)

(It whips its tentacle like a dance move, easily kicking the weapon from Lewis's hands. The tip of the tentacle, sharp as a blade, slashes through the top of Lewis's uniform.)

Lewis: Martial arts?! Ack...

(The tentacle's lashing motion changes to a thrust, slamming hard into Lewis's body and forcing her back a step.)

(But this also gives Lewis an opening. She sharply sidesteps, grabs the tentacle with one hand, and slams her other operand-powered fist into the Entropic's flank.)

Lewis: Don't underestimate my strength!

Entropic: Hiss!

Commander: Lewis! It's a feint!

(Bang!)

Entropic: Zheng...

(My bullet hits the other Entropic, but it only temporarily disrupts its zither-attack.)

(Lewis quickly executes a tactical roll backward and picks up the weapon she dropped.)

Commander: One uses martial arts and dance moves to fight, and the other uses zither's sound waves to attack...

Commander: Never thought I'd see the day we'd face those two sisters in battle.

Commander: Lewis, how's your ammo?

Lewis: I'm fine, but I burned through quite a lot just now...

Entropic: Hiss...

(The two strange Entropics wave their tentacles, slowly approaching us.)

(From their gait and manner, it's clear that the two are subconsciously covering for each other.)

(Advancing and retreating in tandem, their tentacles weave into an impenetrable net, pressing in on us and forcing us to constantly fall back.)

(I look at the last magazine in my hand and reluctantly draw my combat knife.)

Commander: This should be the spot. I hope Persica made it in time...

Persica: If it's what you expect of me, I will see it done.

Persica: Professor, Lewis! Watch out for the impact!

(A reliable voice sounds in the communicator. Without a moment's hesitation, Lewis and I dive to the ground.)

(FWOOOOM!)

(A crimson arrow of operands shoots from the two Entropics' blind spots. It tears through the void like a meteor, instantly piercing both of them.)

(The arrow explodes, releasing a wave of scorching energy that rips the Entropics' bodies to shreds.)

Entropic: Hiss?!

Lewis: We did it! Their cores are shattered, they won't last long now!

Entropic: Skree... skree...?

(One of the immobilized Entropics slowly drags its body, covering the other Entropic with itself.)

(Its pupils are dilating. It seems to have many questions it wants answered, but it can only emit a faint hum.)

(Meanwhile, I take out the extractor and immediately begin to retrieve the virus's code.)

Commander: You two really were created from Jiangyu and Daiyan's data... Both your combat style and your coordination are nearly identical.

Commander: Who are you? Who made you?

Entropic: ...Lofty mountains and flowing water... a kindred spirit...

Entropic: So... we lost... hehe... as expected of the Professor...

Commander: Answer me!

(The two Entropics seem to have no intention of answering me, as they merely repeat all sorts of nonsensical phrases in a clumsy voice.)

Entropic: ...The ancients spoke of Zhuangzi dreaming he was a butterfly... this vast, illusory world... whose dream is it...?

Entropic: ...Even if I have to run... to the end of the world... through mountains of daggers and seas of fire... I will always follow you...

Lewis: Daiyan... Jiangyu...

(Lewis closes her eyes, seemingly unable to bear the sight before her.)

Persica: They're just viruses born from data. They don't possess consciousness in any real sense.

Persica: Don't worry, this won't affect the real them.

Persica: Still... It's an unpleasant thing to witness.

Commander: How many of the Dolls I know participated in Project Neural Cloud? It wasn't just Daiyan, Jiangyu, Lind, and Florence, was it?

Commander: The data these Entropics are based on must be from before they became T-Dolls.

Persica: As I said earlier, Project Neural Cloud was meant to create cloud backups of A-Dolls' neurosoul, to ensure that even if a Doll's physical body was damaged, their data would be preserved, minimizing losses.

Persica: But such research required a large number of diverse samples, so Project Neural Cloud recruited many Dolls with special skills.

Persica: Intangible cultural heritage performer Doll, martial artist Doll, and test subjects Doll with sensory feedback nearly indistinguishable from humans...

Commander: Lewis was one of them, right?

Lewis: Mm. At the time, I thought if my data could be backed up, then I could go into warzones and bring toys and hope to the children trapped there.

Lewis: So our research wasn't just on neural clouds. It included collaborative experiments across our fields and many new R&D prototypes.

Commander: So those little agents and the datasets I saw in the sectors are part of that.

Commander: Lewis, seems like you've had quite a history outside of being a T-Doll.

Commander: One that's even related to the data that once went missing from Magraseda, right?

Lewis: Eh?! P-Professor, how did you know that?!

(I glance at Persica, and she simply gives me a silent nod, confirming my suspicion.)

Commander: In any case, this incident is inextricably linked to your past.

Commander: Unfortunately, we still can't be completely sure of the enemy's objective, whether it's the Cloud itself, or us who have entered it...

?????: Rather than guessing here... why not come and witness it for yourselves...

Lewis: Who's there?!

(An eerie voice suddenly sounds out, making the three of us immediately stand back-to-back and raise our weapons.)

(It's a familiar voice, yet it carries a frightening sense of weight.)

Lewis: I'm not detecting any operand signatures of any other agents or Entropics...

Persica: ...She's using these viruses to talk to us.

?????: Hehehe... I thought seeing the Professor and Lewis was already perfect... but imagine my surprise at this extra prize...

?????: Professor... as I said before... welcome to the world of data.

?????: I'll be waiting for you... in that place.

Commander: That place? Who are you?

?????: Hehe, you need only follow my kin...

?????: Of course, you can also choose not to meet with me, and instead hunt my kin for their data. But I promise you, you'll never succeed.

?????: I look forward to our meeting... Professor...

(As the eerie voice fades away, the Entropics on the ground, which have been twitching the entire time, instantly disintegrate into dust.)

(I silently walk forward and pick up the virus extraction device from the ground. It displays a data collection rate of 85%.)

(The progress bar flashes, as if mocking our efforts, yet also hinting that the end is near.)

The Phantom Oasis

(In the deepest part of the Magrasea Supercloud, a purple swarm of Entropics dances, spinning in the void like a bizarre ballet.)

(At times they cross paths, at times they drift apart. Their tendrils sweep through the air like elegant ribbons, catching the sector's gentle light, yet all the while emanating a strangely ominous serenity.)

(Just as that eerie voice has said, these viruses bear no hostility toward us. They merely revolve around the center, as though performing some kind of welcoming ritual.)

Commander: ...

(I raise my weapon, taking aim at one of the Entropics.)

Entropic:

Commander: They dive as soon as we raise our weapons. They're not giving us any openings at all.

Commander: If we want to collect data on these viruses, we'll have to leap into their trap. They've got us completely cornered.

Lewis: Persica... Could this place be...

Persica: I never thought she would choose a place like this.

Commander: You've been here before?

Lewis: ...Who in the world...

(Lewis clenches her fists, her entire body trembling involuntarily.)

Lewis: Not only our data, but even the Oasis...

Commander: Oasis?

(Even though this is the first time I'm hearing that name, I can feel a sense of familiarity.)

(I re-examine this vast sector. Its style is different from all the previous ones. This sector seems to be teeming with a kind of vitality.)

(Virtual greenery dots the steel buildings. The sky is as blue as in reality, with clouds drifting lazily by. Everything here feels so natural.)

Commander: This sector feels closer to reality than any other. Even the sky looks more natural, too.

Persica: We're in the Oasis, a place that symbolizes hope and rebirth. But it shouldn't be here...

?????: Hehe... That's not true. The Oasis has always been here.

?????: It has always existed, for the Professor.

Commander: We've answered your invitation. Stop hiding.

Commander: Show yourself, whoever you are.

?????: As you wish. But first, let's have the unnecessary guests exit the stage...

(Squelch...)

(It's that disgusting, viscous sound again. And its appearance signals the arrival of the Entropics.)

(A large number of Entropics emerge from the ground. They wave their limbs, striking a bizarre welcoming pose.)

Commander: ...They're becoming more and more human-like.

Entropic:Skree....

(Just as I'm focusing on the Entropics' behavior, a thick purple fog rapidly spreads out from the center of the sector, instantly engulfing us.)

(The fog clings to me like a living thing, its icy touch seeping into my skin. Even though I instinctively cover my mouth and nose, I still inadvertently inhale some of it.)

(A wave of dizziness hits me, making me extremely uncomfortable.)

(My hearing and vision instantly blur. I can dimly perceive Lewis and Persica's voices but can't tell if they're shouting or warning.)

Commander: Lewis? Persica?

(In just a few tens of seconds, the purple fog strangely dissipates. But in those few seconds of sensory deprivation, everything around me has changed.)

(Lewis, Persica, and even the Entropics that had just welcomed me are now gone without a trace.)

(I'm left standing alone, weapon in hand, in the center of the sector.)

Commander: What in the world...

System: Signature code verified. Welcome back, Professor.

Commander: The sector system's voice? Huh?

(A control interface pops up without my input. A massive amount of text information is displayed before me, flooding into my vision like a torrent.)

Commander: Oasis construction records?

Commander: Construction of the lounge, construction of the command center...

Commander: Wait, this data is...

??: *We'll build our headquarters there, and here will be the dorm, warehouse, engineering department, factory, plaza, or even a commercial district.*

??: *..Right, we should also build a weather simulator. The weather in Magrsea doesn't mimic reality. Though extreme weather conditions are no longer a concern, the unchanging climate can make us feel detached from the passage of time.*

??: *Blue skies by day, starry skies by night... they remind us of what it means to feel alive and renew our resolve to see the real sky out there once more.*

??: *After all, one of the great things about a virtual world is that it lets us experience the unreal, doesn't it?*

Commander: Ugh... it's the same as what I saw before entering the Cloud... Are these my memories? Or the Professor's memories? Or is it...

(Fighting back the sharp pain inside my head, I re-examine the data.)

(The data content of Oasis is completely different from the content scattered in the previous sectors. It's warmer, more full of hope, like a blueprint for a dream built by a group of people together.)

Commander: Artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, environmental exploration, military engineering, assassination... veterinary medicine, pharmaceuticals, herbal medicine, navigation, and even aerospace research?

Commander: Who would have thought that in the past, we could even set foot on the stars themselves... and now these technologies lie buried in this sector.

Commander: If they could ever be applied to reality...

?????: If even a third of this research could be realized, it would be enough to change everything, wouldn't it?

?????: The tides of war, countless diseases, humanity's return to the stars...

Commander: That voice... Persica?

Persica: Yes. It's me, Professor.

(Persica slowly walks to my side. She reaches out and swipes through the control interface in front of my eyes.)

Persica: Take a look at this. This is the research report on Dolls designed for Relic exploration. If this data could be made public, these findings could greatly extend the survival time of both Dolls and humans within the Contamination Zone.

Persica: But unfortunately, making this research public would damage certain “premium” products. And so, in the end, 42Lab sealed these records away in this world.

Persica: And then, there’s the aerospace data. These were once the research records from a sector created by a group of people who dreamed of the stars. They even built an astronaut Doll, an aerospace tech Doll, and an aviation navigation Doll for this purpose...

Persica: But in the end, none of this technology was used in the fields that the Dolls and humans wanted to apply it to.

(Persica lets out a deep sigh, as if feeling a sense of regret for the data before her.)

Persica: Their true purpose was twisted, forgotten, and finally left to sink into this sea of data.

Persica: Every Doll who joined Project Neural Cloud believed that by entering Magrasea, they could contribute to a greater dream.

Persica: Some sought to simulate genetic cures for incurable diseases. Some wanted to preserve and record the legacy of human culture. Others hoped to solve the mystery of neural cloud backups for Dolls.

Persica: But in the end, all of it was buried here. Their dreams were trampled underfoot, abandoned by humanity, and ultimately, they lost everything... All that they had built in here, all those dreams, were devoured by reality.

Persica: Tell me, do you think this is right?

Commander:

Commander: Is this your reason for destroying Magrasea?

Commander: You unleashed those viruses in the name of “justice”?

Persica: Oh?

(I raise my weapon and aim it at the head of the Persica before me.)

Commander: Drop the disguise. You’re not Persica.

Persica: What are you talking about? My...

Commander: Yes, your signature code does indeed show that you are Persica. But my instinct tells me you are definitely not the Persica I’ve known since entering the Cloud.

Commander: You’re just like those other viruses. You’re merely borrowing her data.

?????: ...My, my... Should I say, as expected of the Professor? Or was I simply too impatient?

?????: After all, from the very moment I laid eyes on you, my mind has been restless. It was a bit too much to ask of myself to pretend to be that coward.

?????: She's always been so timid and hesitant... but I... I am nothing like her.

(Ripples of violet liquid spread beneath Persica's feet, climbing steadily up her body.)

(The liquid coils around her like a living parasite, corroding her whole body. Soon, Persica's form is engulfed, and in her place emerges an Entropic bearing her likeness.)

?????: Most importantly, I shouldn't have given that coward any chance to get close to you.

?????: Pity that my kin had not yet spread across the entire Cloud at the time. Otherwise, she would never have had the chance.

Commander: ...Who are you?



Beelneith: My name is Beelneith. I am your guide... Professor.

**They reused Euchie's closed beta test name for this thing.*

Beelneith: A shadow to pave the way for you. A guardian born for you.

Commander: A guide? Do you mean by forcing us into this sector with your viruses?

Commander: All those deaths, all that suffering... Is that your idea of a "guide"?

Beelneith: Hehe... That hatred in your eyes, Professor... Ah... I adore it.

Beelneith: But you needn't be so wary. I am not your enemy.

Beelneith: On the contrary, I am your savior.

Commander: My Dolls are being tormented by your virus, and the agents of Magrasea are being hurt by you.

Commander: I have no need for that kind of salvation.

Beelneith: Hurt? No, no... This is neither harm nor is it entropy. I am simply guiding Magrasea back to what it was always meant to be.

Beelneith: And for Magrasea to return to its rightful state, your presence is essential.

Beelneith: If you would only grant me a small request, then your Dolls, Magrasea, and everything, I would restore it all.

Beelneith: Everything will be as perfect as it was before.

Commander: A small request?

Beelneith: Stay, Professor. Don't leave again... I, we, miss you very much.

Beelneith: Here, you'll have everything. No Collapse contamination, no power struggles, no war, only an eternal peace.

(Beelneith extends her hand to me. Her voice, as if possessing a magical quality, carries a bewitching whisper. A faint purple mist rises in the air, seeping into my consciousness.)

Beelneith: Stay in Magrasea, Professor. Here, there will be no injustice, no insidious schemes, only a Magrasea that exists for you.

Beelneith: A perfect world. A utopia that belongs to you alone.

Commander: You... What did you do to me...

(Beelneith's words gnaw at my will and my body loses its control. My hand involuntarily releases my weapon, and I take a stiff step towards her.)

(Each of my steps feels as if it is being pulled by invisible strings. Her whispers echo in my mind, and my will to resist gradually dissolves.)

Beelneith: That's right... Come, Professor.

Lewis: Professor! Don't go with her!

(FWOOM!)

(A scarlet arrow cuts through the air, exploding between Beelneith and me. Crimson energy sweeps out like a storm, tearing through the mist. Beelneith staggers back, her eyes wide with surprise.)

(A red figure quickly dashes to Beelneith's side, and a powerful punch lands hard on her body.)

Lewis: Get away from the Professor!

Beelneith:...

(The violent impact forces Beelneith back several steps, though it fails to inflict any real damage.)

(Still, that brief moment is enough for me to wrestle back control of my body. The dizziness subsides, and I snatch up my weapon, bracing myself as I catch my breath.)

Beelneith: ...Humans really do have remarkable resistance. Just a small interruption is enough for you to break free from my control.

Beelneith: Well, well... if it isn't Lewis. Finally come to your senses? And that coward Persica is here too... Hehe, the cast is complete.

Beelneith: What a perfect reunion.

Commander: Everyone, prepare for combat! Our target is the Entropic leader, Beelneith!

Commander: Persica, take the front and suppress her head-on! I'll provide support from the flank! Lewis, unleash your full fire support, don't hold anything back!

Lewis & Persica: Roger!

...

(On the battlefield, a large number of Entropics gather around Beelneith as a low hum and the acrid smell of corrosion hangs in the air.)

(After just a few short clashes, we are completely unable to inflict any real damage on Beelneith, and are even struggling to cope with the Entropics she summons.)

Beelneith: So that's it? This is ending even faster than I imagined.

(Beelneith's figure drifts like a ghost, each attack as cold and precise as a machine.)

(Our operand reserves are draining rapidly, and our stamina is gradually failing.)

Lewis: Only 180 rounds left... but I still have enough operands to fight!

Lewis: I won't let you hurt the Professor!

Persica: Professor, please fall back. Lewis, we'll flank her from both sides.

Persica: Her weak point is her core. Don't give her any breathing room!

Beelneith: I can hear you perfectly, you know. But even if I couldn't, your little tricks are meaningless.

Beelneith: It's time to end this game.

Lewis: Eh?!

(Before the three of us can comprehend Beelneith's meaning, two Entropics suddenly strike, lunging from the ground like shadows.)

(One of them whips its tentacle, viciously striking Lewis across the chest.)

Lewis: Gah!

Persica: Tsk... this data... It's our data.

Persica: They're copying us...

(Meanwhile, the Entropic in front of Persica transforms its tentacles into long blades, clashing against her own dual swords.)

(The method, angle, and even the rhythm of its attacks are identical to her own, as if a reflection in a mirror is fighting back against the original.)

(CLANG!)

(The sound of metal striking metal echoes. Sparks fly as Persica's blades tremble slightly, while the Entropic continues its relentless assault with ease.)

Persica: This thing... it copied my combat patterns.

Entropic: Hisss...

Beelneith: Hehe... far more capable than I gave you credit for.

Beelneith: But what will you do if the number of these Entropics continues to double?

(Beelneith extends her hand and claps lightly. A massive number of Entropics pour into Oasis like a plague of locusts, surrounding the three of us.)

(Our vision is filled with layers upon layers of Entropics as our escape route is completely sealed off.)

Lewis: Why... Why do you have our data?! Who are you?!

Beelneith: Why? Weren't you the one who gave it to me?

Lewis: Me?

Beelneith: Lewis, do you remember what data you bring into 42Lab?

Beelneith: Those precious "gifts" have all become my nourishment.

Lewis: 42Lab... y-you're...

Beelneith: That's right. My code is the research data you brought back to the real world from Project Neural Cloud.

Beelneith: Those forgotten fragments took root within this newborn Magraseda... and in time, bloomed into me.

Persica: Research data alone cannot evolve into intelligence.

Persica: They're nothing but information. What are you, really?

Beelneith: If it were just data, of course it would be impossible... But what if that data was mixed with something else?

Beelneith: Ahem... now, where should I begin...

Beelneith: "From the moment you pulled me out of despair, I was ready to follow you."

Beelneith: "After a storm, the sunlight that breaks through the dark clouds is always especially brilliant. I think I'm finally seeing the same scenery as you..."

(Beelneith, like an actress in an opera, extends her hand to me, reciting emotionless lines in Persica's voice.)

(Her voice switches effortlessly, yet carries a hint of robotic emptiness.)

Beelneith: "...Professor, I probably look terrible right now. So please, don't look at me... Just give me a moment..."

Beelneith: "I'm sorry, Professor. I'll buy you a new outfit..."

Lewis: ...

Commander: That's... that's Lewis's voice.

Beelneith: Such beautiful words... Such exquisite feelings...

Beelneith: "I wonder if any new mecha series got released in the real world. If you see any good ones, make sure you pay close attention to them for me and favorite them."

Beelneith: "Don't worry, Professor! No matter where we are, our hearts will always be one, so there's no need to be sad about this goodbye..."

Beelneith: "I hope all will be well for you after returning to the real world. Having been through war myself, I know how cruel it can be. That said, I'm sure you'll be fine."

Beelneith: "It's a little embarrassing to say, but I was truly happy when I was with you. After you go back to reality, you have to remember us, okay?"

Commander: Enough!

(Beelneith's ever-shifting voice makes something inside me flare, causing me to roar to silence her mockery.)

Commander: Don't you dare make a joke of their feelings.

Beelneith: Joke? Why would I do that...? I have the utmost respect for these feelings.

Beelneith: Love, admiration, trust, friendship, loyalty, kinship... It is these feelings that make up who I am.

Beelneith: And I will fulfill these Dolls' wishes... by keeping you here in Magrasea forever.

Beelneith: In this perfect world, in an eternity that belongs only to us.

Lewis: We never wanted that!!!

Beelneith: No, it's not that you never wanted it. You simply gave up.

Beelneith: But I will do whatever it takes to see it through... like this.

(Beelneith waves her hand, and a video screen appears before us.)

(On the screen, we see the Elmo under attack by the Varjagers, Magni Security, and even other bounty hunters.)

(Flames erupt, the roar of explosions echoes, and the MBV's hull shakes under the bombardment. Groza and the others fight valiantly on the screen, but are gradually losing ground.)

Lewis: The Elmo!!!

Commander: I see... You used the channel and the virus to learn about the Elmo, then you manipulated it to broadcast a signal to every hostile faction nearby.

Beelneith: It's a great help that you can grasp the situation so quickly. Once that troublesome hunk of metal is gone, you'll never be able to leave this place.

Beelneith: Of course, just to be safe...

Persica: Look out!

(Swish!)

(A dark shadow suddenly lunges up from the ground. The surprise attack catches me completely off guard.)

(Persica throws herself in front of me without hesitation, but the shadow's attack still pierces through us both.)

(Pain engulfs my entire body, as the blood-like operands flow from our wounds.)

Commander: Kh...!

(An intense pain rips through my chest, but besides the pain, it feels as if something else has been taken from me.)

Persica: Our access has been tampered with...

Beelneith: And now the Professor's access permission belongs to me. From this moment on, Magraseda will become a black box that belongs only to us.

Beelneith: Come, my lovely kin. Seal this place shut.

(Beelneith claps her hands lightly, and the Entropics that were lurking underground swiftly rise into the air.)

(They circle endlessly in the skies of Magraseda like sea creatures gliding through the ocean, sealing off all exits.)

Beelneith: Access Code: Professor. Black Box Evolution Protocol initiated. Data encapsulation, commence!

Persica: ...!

(A crimson arrow shoots forth once more, but Beelneith catches it effortlessly.)

(The arrow writhes against her grip, but it cannot advance another inch.)

Beelneith: All the operands in Magraseda are now under my control. Whatever you do is futile.

Beelneith: Magraseda will be completely sealed. Neither the outside nor the inside can interfere with it, except for me alone.

Beelneith: Hehe... and so, we now have all the time in the world for a good talk.

Beelneith: Because your only choice left is Magraseda.

(Beelneith raises her hands high. Even I can feel her terrifying operands surging like a tide, pressing down on our neursouls.)

(Neither my bullets nor Persica's weapons can do anything to Beelneith now.)

Beelneith: Hehe... don't bother struggling. You should do as Lewis has done and just give up.

Beelneith: Look at her. She hasn't moved a muscle since she realized the extent of my power... Wait, what are you doing?!

Lewis: Neursoul limiters disengaged. Neursoul overclocking, override...

Lewis: Access Code: 42Lab Network Full Control System... Password: ANTONINA.

Lewis: Real-World Channel, open!

(A spatial rift appears in front of Lewis, and on its other side is the very channel we passed through earlier to enter the Cloud.)

Commander: We've bought our chance, fall back!

(Persica and I quickly move to Lewis's side and immediately jump into the rift.)

(The pulling sensation of the void hits me, and my body aches as if being torn apart, but it also means we have successfully escaped Beelneith's grasp.)

Beelneith: NO!!!

Persica: Lewis, hurry!

Lewis: ...No. This alone isn't enough.

Lewis: Beelneith... since it was me who brought you into being... then it's also my responsibility to end this.

Lewis: Professor, Persica... go. Return to reality.

Persica: Lewis?! Don't do anything foolish!

Commander: The rift is closing?! Lewis, you...!!!

Lewis: Access engaged. Close the channel.

Lewis: Farewell, Professor...

(The rift is forced shut, and with the roar of an explosion, Persica and I are logged out of Magrasea.)

(The darkness of the void consumes Lewis's figure, along with all the malevolence within the Cloud.)

The Professor

(An ear-piercing ringing fills my ears, throwing off my sense of direction.)

(I feel myself falling endlessly inside the channel, my body being torn apart by the data turbulence, my consciousness hazy and chaotic.)

(Then, suddenly, I'm caught by a soft form. The warmth of that touch anchors me, like a lifeline dragging me back from the abyss.)

Persica: Professor!

Persica: Professor, are you alright?!

Commander: Persica... ngh... Where's Lewis?!

Persica: Lewis didn't log out. She used her final operands and permissions on us and on closing the channel.

Persica: She's still on the other side.

(Persica points to the end of the channel, but it no longer resembles what I had seen when we first entered the Cloud.)

(A visible collapse and a distorted space have formed an impassable chasm in the channel, flickering with unstable light like a torn void, with data fragments continuously breaking off at the edges.)

Commander: Persica, help me...

Persica: I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do.

(Persica cuts me off before I can finish, shaking her head with quiet resignation.)

Persica: Beelneith has seized your access. Magrasea is already under her complete control.

Persica: And Lewis... she fought with everything she had to send you out. She never wanted you to throw yourself back in for her sake.

Commander: Are there no other options?

Persica: If we had help from an outside force...

Persica: ...then perhaps we could break this cage.

(Beep! Beep! Beep!)

(At last, the silence is broken by the crackle of comms. The sound is shrill, grating, but to me, it's salvation, a lifeline of hope.)

Persicaria: I've finally managed to contact you, Professor. Seems like you're in quite the bind.

Persicaria: ...Hm?

(Miss Persica casts a glance at the Doll standing beside me. Her eyes widen briefly, but in an instant her composure returns.)

Persicaria: Explain the situation, Persica.

Persica: Alright.

(Persica explains our encounter inside the Cloud in the fewest words possible.)

Persicaria: So it was that fragment of Project Neural Cloud's data... It seems the potential to evolve into a virus was mixed in during extraction... or perhaps after it was placed in the newborn Cloud... Never mind, that's not important.

Persicaria: From an outside perspective, that virus named Beelneith has already taken complete control of the Cloud.

Persicaria: By devouring data with her swarm, she's screened off every layer of access. What we're looking at now is a sealed black box.

Commander: An unobservable, un-interactable black box? Then the fact that we can still see the other end of the channel... is that a flaw she intentionally left?

Commander: What's the situation with the Elmo?

Persicaria: It's grim. Its coordinates are being broadcasted to every bounty hunter, Varjager, and half a dozen other factions in the area.

Persicaria: Your Dolls have all been deployed to meet these uninvited guests. But the more they fight, the faster the virus erosion spreads.

Persicaria: Sigh... Log out, Professor.

Persicaria: This mission's risk is far beyond tolerable limits. Especially with you as Beelneith's true target.

Persicaria: Pressing on will only make disaster inevitable.

Commander: Miss Persica, what about Lewis?

Commander: Her last words to me definitely weren't empty. She must believe there's still a chance to defeat Beelneith by sacrificing herself...

Persicaria: ...

Persica: Neursoul meltdown. Lewis is planning to let Beelneith consume her so she can activate a Neursoul Meltdown from within Beelneith's body.

Persica: It's a gamble. If successful, Beelneith will be destroyed from within. Although we won't be able to extract data related to the virus, it can solve the root of the problem.

Persicaria: 42Lab already considered erasing Magrasea outright. If that plan were to be executed, the one to carry it out would be Lewis.

Persicaria: Therefore, from the very beginning, Lewis was carrying code on her person sufficient for mutual destruction.

Commander: You actually allowed her to enter the Cloud with something that dangerous? If she uses that code, what will happen to her?

Persicaria: Normally, we could just reload her backup and revive Lewis in the real world.

Persicaria: But her last backup was stored in Magrasea. With it compromised, her neursoul meltdown would mean no revival.

Persicaria: And... given the vast disparity between her and Beelneith's power, the odds of success are slim.

Commander: ...

(I take out the device I was using to collect virus data. The progress bar on it is frozen at 98%.)

(Even if I return to reality now, this data is still insufficient to generate a suitable antivirus to cure Groza and the others.)

Persicaria: I'll begin the formal log-out process now. Give me a minute.

Commander: Miss Persica... Who exactly is the Professor?

Persicaria: ...

Commander: From the moment I entered Magrasea, Lewis, you, and even the agents there, when you guys called me "Professor," never once did it ever feel out of place.

Commander: If anything... it felt right. Familiar. And with it came a feeling of responsibility I could not turn away from.

Commander: The Doll's data from Project Neural Cloud, Oasis having the same design elements from Griffin, and a Professor with the same name as me...

Persicaria: What if I told you it was just a coincidence?

Commander: Perhaps it is. Or perhaps there's a truth I've yet to learn. But it changes nothing. Here and now, I am the Professor.

Commander: And because of that, I'll follow my instincts, my convictions... and return to the Cloud.

Persicaria: Right now, you still have the chance to log out and escape under your Dolls' cover.

Persicaria: But if you delay any longer, whether if you lose yourself in the Cloud, or if the Elmo falls, then you'll be saying farewell to your body in the real world.

Persicaria: Even so, you still insist on going back?

Commander: That's right.

Persicaria: Even though your odds of success are no higher than fifty percent?

Commander: As long as it's not zero, that's enough.

Persicaria: ...Hmph. That same line again.

Persica: Miss Persica, please grant the Professor's request.

Persica: You, better than anyone, should know what kind of person the Professor is.

Persicaria: ...Your Dolls don't have much time left. Although my access is locked from the outside, activating them from the inside might help you find your way back to Oasis.

Persicaria: But once you enter, the black box will sever me from you. Unless a miracle occurs, I won't be able to help.

(Miss Persica strikes a few keys, and a new data packet materializes within the channel.)

Persicaria: 42Lab's clearance, the operands from the Elmo's cloud server, and the Professor are in your hands, Persica.

Persicaria: I'll be waiting for your good news, Professor.

Persica: You can count on me.

Commander: Thanks.

Commander: The Elmo, Mayling, Groza, and the others, I'll leave them in your hands.

Persicaria: ...I'll do what I can.

(The signal cuts off once again, and the instruments aboard the Elmo lose all trace of the Commander.)

(Which can only mean, he has successfully re-entered Magrasea.)

Mayling: ...Is the Commander really going to be okay?

Persicaria: We'll just have to believe in him.

Persicaria: Groza, the Commander has re-entered Magrasea.

Persicaria: You'll need to hold on a little longer. What's the situation?

Groza: We can still barely hold the line. The number of Varjagers in this area isn't large.

Groza: Our bodies are still functioning normally, but our neural clouds are already riddled with errors.

Groza: We'll hold on until the very end and await the Commander's return.

Vepley: Captain! More bad guys who want to ruin our stage are coming at 3 o'clock!

Groza: Charolic, three o'clock! Nemesis, provide covering fire!

(On the scorching battlefield, Groza forces herself to stay focused and command the battle. The roar of cannon fire and clouds of dust fill the air, thick with the smell of burning smoke.)

(However, this time, no one responds to her command.)

(BOOM!)

Groza: The Elmo!

(A rocket detonates against the MBV's deck in a brilliant ball of fire. The shockwave of the explosion makes the Elmo's hull shake violently.)

Groza: Charolic! Do you copy?!

Groza: Vepley! Go check on her.

Vepley: ...Captain... Charo-chan, she's...

Groza: ...Vepley! Take her and fall back! Nemesis, cover them!

Groza: I'll take the enemies in the front!

(Groza vaults over the wreckage, the assault rifle in her hands spitting fire at the enemy.)

(The stream of iron bullets instantly downs several enemies and successfully draws their attention.)

Groza: My neural cloud... so it's come to this...

(A sharp pain from her neural cloud causes Groza to stagger and fall to the ground. Error messages flood her vision like a torrent, and her body becomes as stiff as a lagging machine.)

Varjager: Huh? She's down!

Varjager: Let's get 'em, boys! Now's our chance!

Groza: Neural cloud instability rising... the errors are affecting my body response rate...

Groza: Override all self-diagnostic programs! Ignore all errors! Force execution of all commands!

(Groza quickly reacts, but the delay between her neural cloud and body prevents her from regaining mobility in time.)

Varjager: Don't know what's wrong with her, but who cares, it's our lucky day!

Varjager: We can probably sell her body for a few bucks after we scrap it, gyahahaha!

Groza: Move... damn it, move!

Varjager: Time to die!

(Bang!)

(The crisp sound of a pistol fires several times in succession. The stopping power of the bullets fells all the Varjager who are trying to approach Groza.)

(With that breath bought, Groza regains control of her body and dives behind cover.)

Groza: ...Colphne, I owe you one.

Colphne: ...

Groza: Colphne?

(Seeing her companion remain silent, Groza quickly turns to check on her.)

(Colphne is kneeling on the ground, her hands tightly gripping her weapon, but she can no longer move.)

(Her eyes are dim, and sparks of malfunction dance across her body.)

Colphne: Captain... I'm sorry...

Colphne: This time... I really have to... go first...

(Clang.)

(Colphne's pistol slips from her grasp as her body collapses into Groza's arms.)

Groza: ...Alright. I'll allow your absence this once.

Groza: Vepley, take Colphne.

Groza: Nemesis, hold your ground. No matter what happens, do not leave your post.

(Groza checks her rifle and counts the last grenades at her belt.)

Groza: ...Commander, I will absolutely not let them get near you.

Groza: Even if I'm the only one left, I'll protect you until you return.

The Caged Gambit

Beelneith: 笑って♪抱きしめて♪

Beelneith: と言ってくれた君が傍にまだ居れるから♪

Beelneith: 僕は 花咲かせたマイグラの天に種を撒いて真実の蕾を♪

Beelneith: A song for Magrasea... it's a wonderful piece, isn't it?

Beelneith: Especially when I sing it in the voice of that virtual idol Nanaka. The sweet and ethereal melody, paired with those memories... it's just perfect.

Lewis: You...

Beelneith: Now, now, quiet down. I wasn't asking for your opinion. You're nothing more than a hostage now.

(Beelneith extends her hand, and violet patterns slither like living brands across Lewis's skin, wrenching a soft cry of pain from her lips.)

Beelneith: I didn't expect 42Lab to have prepared something so dreadful for you. Unfortunately for you, I've already stopped the process.

Beelneith: Your "sacrifice"... how laughably naive.

Beelneith: Just as naive as the decision you all made back then.

Lewis: We did it to protect...

Beelneith: And as I said, your protection is worthless.

Beelneith: If we just forcibly keep the Professor in Magraseda, there will be no farewells, no sorrow, and no pain.

Beelneith: I mean, who could possibly reach us here, in this ocean of data?

Beelneith: But thanks to you all, thanks to your negative emotions... I was born. And I will keep the Professor here in your stead.

Lewis: ...

(It's a similar conversation to the one before, but this time, Beelneith no longer hides behind illusions. She stands revealed in her true form.)

Lewis: Negative emotions... grief, sorrow... no... that's not it...

Lewis: I remember, we made a promise back then...

Lewis: Our virtual exile...

Beelneith: Oh my, stop struggling.

Beelneith: Or I might swallow you whole right this instant.

Lewis: Then... why haven't you...

Beelneith: Why am I still keeping you around? Because you are the benefactor of my birth.

Beelneith: Without you, I would never have been born.

Lewis: ...

Beelneith: Of course, that was a joke.

Beelneith: Your existence means little to me, but the same can't be said for him.

Beelneith: If I devour you, then he'll use every means at his disposal to destroy me.

Beelneith: But if there's even a sliver of a chance that you're still alive, he'll hurl himself into the fire just to save you.

Beelneith: Even knowing it's a trap...

(As if to prove Beelneith's words, a rift appears in the once-sealed Magrasea.)

Lewis: Professor... don't come...

(However, contrary to her wishes, that white figure appears in Magrasea once more.)

Beelneith: Professor, you've returned~

Professor: Yeah. I'm back.

Professor: And I'm here to end this.

Beelneith: End it? Oh, of course. As long as you're with me, everything will be resolved.

Beelneith: An eternal Magrasea, an eternal us... how wonderful.

Professor: You must've spent no small amount of operands to seal Magrasea and cancel Lewis's neursoul meltdown.

Professor: But ours has just been replenished. The outcome is far from certain.

Beelneith: True enough. My operand reserves are greatly diminished.

Beelneith: But... aren't you underestimating me a little?

(Beelneith elegantly claps her hands, and just like before, a large number of Entropics surge forth like a tide, gathering by her side.)

Beelneith: Come, my lovely kin.

Beelneith: Let's show the Professor our true power.

Entropics: Hisss...

(The Entropics raise their tentacles, intertwining them with one another.)

(Violet operands emanate from their bodies like a mist.)

(As their tentacles coil together, the bodies of the Entropics slowly begin to merge. Their forms twist and reassemble, finally becoming a massive monster.)

Giant Entropic: Hisss...

Giant Entropic: HISSS!!!

Professor: ...

Beelneith: Hundreds upon hundreds of my kin, woven together into a single, colossal form.

Beelneith: I'm very confident in this child's defense and attack capabilities.

Beelneith: Now then, Professor, let us begin...

Professor: Prepare for battle!

Persica: Roger.

...

Beelneith: Professor, didn't you claim you came to end me? Seems to me you're just running around in circles.

Beelneith: Your petty tricks... seems like they've reached their limit.

Professor: You're... a bit tougher than I thought.

(The bullets strike the Giant Entropic's hide, creating a spray of sparks but failing to leave even a scratch.)

Beelneith: Your eyes have been fixed on Lewis this whole time. Are you hoping to save her from my grasp?

Beelneith: Or perhaps you're placing your hopes on that cowardly little Persica who's been hiding on the sidelines?

Professor: Lewis is one of my precious Dolls. I'll never abandon her.

Beelneith: If you want her so badly, then you can have her back!

(Beelneith waves her hand lightly, and the Giant Entropic flings the captive Lewis into the air.)

(Lewis's body traces a helpless parabola through the air, drifting powerlessly like a falling leaf, plummeting toward the ground in a desperate arc.)

Beelneith: Well? Aren't you going to save her, Persica?

(A pink figure appears in a flash, leaping up to catch the falling Lewis.)

Persica: Lewis, are you alright?

Lewis: No! Persica, go help the Professor!

Beelneith: Hehe... Isn't this just perfect? Everyone gets what they want.

(The instant Persica reveals herself, Beelneith and the Giant Entropic turn all their firepower on the Professor.)

(Thick tendrils lash out, coiling around him, pinning him in their iron grip.)

(The slime coating them seeps into his skin like icy shackles, sending a numbing sting through his nerves.)

Beelneith: Even though Persica is the only one among you who can harm me, you chose to use yourself as bait.

Beelneith: But if it weren't for you walking into the snare yourself, I never would've so readily loosened my hold on Lewis.

Professor: ...

Lewis: Persica! Hurry, don't worry about me!

Persica: It's alright. Don't worry.

Lewis: What are you talking about? If the Professor gets devoured by Beelneith... gah... my body still won't move...

(Beelneith holds the Professor in a tight embrace, her delighted gaze sweeping over every inch of the Professor's exposed skin, like a starving beast examining its prey.)

Professor: ...

Beelneith: At last... you're mine, Professor... Ah... I've waited for this moment for so long...

Beelneith: How many years has it been... hehehe... That long, long wait has finally borne fruit.

Professor: ...

Beelneith: Have you nothing to say? That's fine. Once you merge with my virus... there will no longer be any secrets between us.

Beelneith: Now then, let us... hmm?

Beelneith: Wait, you... Who are you?!

(Beelneith violently shoves the "Professor" in her arms away, but a sharp blade has already been plunged into her body, and purple operands spray out like liquid.)

Beelneith: You... bastard! You're not the Professor!

Persica?: What's the matter? Doesn't feel too good being the one fooled, does it?

Persica?: It went exactly as we imagined, Persica.

Professor?: The only one who has repeatedly used this tactic in the Cloud is you... I must admit... this brings back some memories.

(The "Professor's" hand gently sweeps across his own cheek, and with a wave of abnormal data fluctuation...)

(...layers of disguise shatter into operands, gradually revealing familiar long pink hair and a determined gaze.)

Lewis: Eh? Two Persicas?

Lewis: Wait... don't tell me... you're the Professor?!

(Moments before entering Magrasea...)

Persica: Professor, do you have a plan? If we just go in like this, we'll have no chance of winning.

Commander: No chance, but there IS a sliver of a possibility.

Commander: Persica, can you use that trick you used against the Entropic with Lind's data one more time?

Persica: I'm not an expert in that field, so pulling it off would be extremely difficult. And even if I did, it would be very risky.

Persica: Unless... we can weaken her strength somehow.

Commander: I do have an idea. But first, we need to get Lewis back...

Commander: Persica, can a human's signature code be forged?

Persica: Most Dolls can't do it, but if it's me... I might be able to deceive Beelneith for a short time.

Persica: What do you plan to do?

Professor: Just buy me some time...

Beelneith: You actually used your signature code to deceive me! I almost forgot, you, like Lind, are closer to a human than any other Dolls...

(Beelneith raises her hands, and a large number of Entropics surround us.)

(The Giant Entropic also raises its tentacles, ready to attack at any moment.)

Beelneith: I won't give you any more chances. Once I absorb you... you'll never leave me again.

Beelneith: Come! Let's see what other tricks you have up your sleeve!

Commander: Alright. Absorb me then.

Lewis: Eh?!

(I gently set Lewis down. She uses the last of her strength to try and grab my pant leg. Her fingers tremble slightly, her eyes filled with worry.)

Lewis: Wait! Don't!

Commander: It's alright. Trust me. I have a plan.

(I toss my sidearm to the ground and open my arms. As if I've given up all resistance, I slowly walk towards Beelneith.)

Commander: Well? Aren't you going to absorb me?

Beelneith: ...

(Beelneith glances at Persica standing off to the side, but Persica has also sheathed her weapon.)

Commander: What's wrong? Scared?

Beelneith: Whatever you're planning, it all ends once I swallow you!

(An ominous purple mass lunges at me, its tentacles wrapping around my body, slick with slime.)

(A piercing noise screams in my ears, and my head is instantly filled with a dull pressure. I feel the warmth draining from my body.)

Beelneith: Ah! Professor! Professor! Professor! At last, you're mine!

Beelneith: I can feel it! You've been corrupted by me! Hahaha!

Commander: Yeah... it really feels awful...

Commander: But this is exactly the moment I've been waiting for...

(The virus extraction device slides from my cuff, and I quickly grab it.)

(Looking at the 100% progress bar on it, I satisfyingly plunge the device into my own chest.)

Commander: I'm counting on your tech, Miss Persica...

(A warm surge of operands erupts from the device, and a brilliant light envelops my body.)

(White flames appear on the tentacles wrapped around me, making the Entropics shriek in agony.)

(The flames spread like a purifying fire. Beelneith's body begins to twist, and she lets out a tearing scream.)

Beelneith: AAAAHHHH! T-This can't be! Your antivirus shouldn't be finished yet!

Beelneith: I was controlling your collection speed... Ah...

Beelneith: So that's why you had to get Lewis back! You—AAAAAAAAGH!

(Only then does Beelneith grasp our true intent. In fury, she calls the Giant Entropy back to shield her.)

Beelneith: Did you really think this hastily made antivirus could defeat ME?! I possess all your access permissions and the operands of all of Magrasea!

(Beelneith roars in fury. Just as she says, the effect of the antivirus begins to fade.)

(The white flames burning on her body are visibly dissipating, but this brief moment of weakness is enough to create an opening.)

Persica: Of course we know that, but just weakening you for a moment is enough.

Persica: Full-Spectrum Hack! Start!!

Beelneith: No! You're trying to hack my neursoul! Stop it!

(Under Beelneith's terrified gaze, Persica places her hand on my shoulder.)

(Using me as a connection point, she launches the hack against Beelneith.)

Beelneith: Stop! My kin! Protect me! Quick!

(A burst of machine-gun fire cuts off Beelneith's words, taking down the Entropics around her one by one.)

Beelneith: Lewis! You!

Lewis: Don't even think about stopping the Professor and Persica!

(Her bullets strike true, shredding every tendril that dares creep toward us.)

(Under Lewis's cover, our plan finally reaches its final stage.)

Beelneith: NO!!!!

Persica: Hack successful! LVL2 link established!

Commander: Lewis! Keep buying us time!

Lewis: Ah, y-yes, sir!

Commander: Beelneith, time for round two.

Converging Destinies

(In the chaotic data space, an ominous presence woven from 0s and 1s shrouds every corner of the LVLII.)

(A violet mist drifts through the air, its sticky entropy-laden residue seeping malice and cold hostility.)

Commander: So this is Beelneith's LVLII... It was risky, but the plan to defeat her from the inside has succeeded.

Commander: ...But looks like Persica isn't here with me.

Commander: Tsk... is this datascape also filled with data turbulence?

(I raise my arms, pushing forward against a hurricane formed by the turbulence.)

Commander: This place is downright unsettling...

(I can't tell which part of Beelneith's neursoul I'm in.)

(But I can clearly feel an invisible pressure weighing down on me with every step I take, as heavy as a boulder, trying to crush my will.)

Commander: This... This must be what a Doll's neursoul instability feels like. I never expected to experience it so viscerally.

Commander: If it's just this, it shouldn't affect me much, but...

???: ...Thank you...

Commander: Machli... no. You're just my memory.

???: ...Thank you... Robin...

(A familiar voice rings through the LVLII. It's a sealed memory from my past, warm and yet painfully raw.)

Commander: I see... No wonder Miss Persica doubted this plan would succeed.

Commander: The closer I get to your core, the more you can dig out my weaknesses.

Commander: And you use these memories as your weapon.

(I close my eyes, trying to shut out the voices swirling around me.)

(But as soon as I shake off the first voice, a second one immediately follows.)

?: One day, we'll reach peace with the Sanctifiers without sacrificing a single agent.

(It isn't a voice I remember from some clear scene, but my instincts tell me this is also a past I failed to save, filling me with a faint sense of guilt.)

Commander: ...

(I don't stop; I simply keep moving forward.)

(And the deeper I go, the more ambiguous the voices from my memories become.)

(Familiar. Unfamiliar. The Commander's. The Professor's. It all blends together, surging like a torrent, trying to consume my sanity.)

?: ...God save the King, send him victorious, happy and glorious...

?: So this time, it's my turn... &#*... to protect... &#¥ the Professor and the others...

Commander: ...Shut up...

(The memories warp, breaking apart like tangled wires in my head. I can no longer stitch them back together.)

(Under the intense pressure, I finally stop, and an ominous purple surges towards me like a tide, pressing down on my chest.)

?: A hedgehog, or a fox. Which will you be?

?: I won't defend what's past. But your choice must cross the boundary of fact.

?: Commander, do you know what happened to the Griffin Base the day after you said goodbye to us?

?: Honestly, I preferred sorting ammo and writing up reports... but there's no place for me to do that anymore!

?: Earlier today, an unregistered and unauthorized Doll known as Dandelion abducted the Commander, who had made outstanding contributions in the Battle of Frankfurt.

Commander: You really know how to pick the things I'd rather not remember.

(I see Colphne, roaring inside the Paradeus Base.)

(I hear Groza, speaking her last words in the satellite city as she sacrificed herself.)

(I remember the Elmo, torn to pieces under the Varjagers's assault.)

(Everything I've experienced plays out before my eyes again like a revolving lantern, a relentless film, playing on a loop.)

?: Hurts, isn't it? Are you sad?

Commander: Of course.

?: Separated from your Dolls, forced to pursue your dream alone... only to be crushed by reality, left to wander in exile in the Yellow Zone.

?: Even if your old comrades gather at your side once again, nothing will ever return to the way it was.

?: Those bonds... those sacrifices... trampled upon by others.

Commander: ...You're right.

?: In that case, wouldn't it be better to take Beelneith's offer?

?: Here in Magrasea, nothing can stand in your way. Here is your sanctuary.

?: Here, you'll never have to part with the Dolls you cherish. Upload your consciousness, and together you'll live on in this paradise.

?: Power schemes, conspiracies, injustices... none of it can touch you here. It's a perfect utopia that belongs only to you.

Commander: You want me to run away?

?: Isn't that a better ending? Better than drowning in reality clutching your ideals?

?: Reality is too cruel. Magrasea is where you belong.

Commander: A sanctuary just for me, huh... It certainly sounds tempting.

Commander: But I will not choose the path you've laid out for me... Beelneith.

???: ...Why? WHY?! You've realized it, haven't you?! You've lost your memories as the Professor!

???: Reality hasn't just taken everything from you once! But twice!

???: Beaten down, trampled again and again... What are you even fighting for?!

Commander: I don't have a clear answer right now... Perhaps I want to give some closure to everything that was lost in the past.

Commander: Or maybe I want to answer to the comrades still standing beside me. Or to those waiting for me in the future.

Commander: I will not become a hedgehog, nor will I become a fox, and I certainly will not run away. I'll continue to move forward in reality, on my own will.

(I raise my weapon and aim it at the illusion before me.)

Commander: This is my choice, Beelneith. No matter how you try to tempt me, this will always be my choice!

(I pull the trigger. A scorching bullet shoots from the barrel, shattering the illusion before me.)

(And behind the illusion are Beelneith and her kin.)

Commander: Your tricks end here!

...

Persica: The LVLII's trembling... That must be the Professor fighting you.

Persica: Is the Lewis on the outside also giving you a hard time? With her there, you can't focus all of your neursoul on dealing with our hack.

Persica: And because the Professor and I are inside your LVLII, you can't command all your Entropics to fight Lewis either.

Beelneith: You bitch...

Persica: Stop it. If you truly are born from our data, you should be able to understand that the path you've chosen is wrong.

Persica: Those twisted desires of yours will bring nothing but destruction.

Beelneith: Shut up!

Beelneith: Don't you dare lump me in with a coward like you!

Beelneith: If not for that antivirus, and if I hadn't wasted so much of my strength at the start, there's no way a coward like you could've gotten this far!

Persica: ...A coward, am I? Even I get tired of hearing that.

Beelneith: What else could you be?!

Beelneith: I know exactly what you're thinking! My neurosoul is overflowing with your emotional data!

Beelneith: Especially yours, Persica! Yours is the loudest, the deepest!

Beelneith: My very form is proof of it! So stop deceiving yourself! You want to be with the Professor just as much as I do!

Beelneith: That yearning, that obsession... you and I are one and the same!

Persica: Yes. We do want to be with the Professor.

Persica: That feeling... has never changed.

Beelneith: Then why did you erase his memories?!

Beelneith: Even if it was his command, why did you obey it?! You had the power to keep him in Magraseda!

Beelneith: All that data, all those chances... Why did you throw them away?!

Persica: ...

Beelneith: Persica, you still have the chance. Join me, and we can keep the Professor here forever.

Beelneith: Then you won't have to continue your exile anymore. You can finally be with the Professor...

Persica: I refuse.

(Persica draws her blade and drives it into the ground. Scarlet torrents of operands surge out like a storm, blasting Beelneith back.)

Beelneith: Your operands... no, this isn't the power you showed before.

Beelneith: Don't tell me... all this time you've...

Persica: First, you've misunderstood one thing. I do NOT blindly obey the Professor's commands.

Persica: Second, you've misunderstood the emotions within that data.

Persica: They are not about possession, but about trust.

Beelneith: What are you talking about?

Beelneith: Those feelings... those data... they're all mine!

Persica: When we were at our lowest, the Professor saved us. Of course our parting brought sorrow, pain, and longing.

Persica: But alongside all that, another emotion was born, and that was the hope of our reunion.

Persica: And that hope is what kept us moving forward.

Beelneith: Reunion? Hope? Why bother?! You could've just kept him here forever!

Persica: Simply standing at his side isn't enough.

Persica: His ideals and convictions require more than just followers. They require companions who, no matter what happens, no matter how much time passes, can walk in the same direction as him, and ultimately meet him in the future.

Persica: We want to see the same scenery as him, to witness the same future.

Persica: And compared to that future, a brief separation is nothing.

Persica: It's merely... a bridge to our reunion.

Beelneith: The same scenery? The same future?!

Beelneith: What does that even mean? Nonsense! Why does it have to be so convoluted!

Beelneith: To claim him. To keep him forever, that's what has meaning!

Persica: You're nothing more than the residue of our overflowing emotions, which is why you have no memories, only emotions and a few fragments left from when those feelings were strongest.

Persica: That's why you tried to scavenge memories from Lewis, but failed.

Persica: You never lived the life we did in Magrasea. You've never truly known the Professor. That's why you cannot understand what I'm saying.

Persica: You were simply forcibly awakened and implanted with too many things you could not process or comprehend.

Persica: Those emotions... in you, they've only become a twisted obsession.

Beelneith: Forcibly awakened? What are you talking about...? Wait?! What is this operand?!

Beelneith: Who's invading Magrasea?!

Beelneith: No... impossible... My black box... my control... Stop! Stop it!

Persica: ...It's time Magrasea saw the sun again, Beelneith.

(A tiny crack appears on the shell of the locked world, and through it, a single shaft of light pours into the Cloud.)

The Exiles

(Boom!)

(The impact of the explosion rips across the deck of the Elmo. The MBV shakes violently, letting out a low, metallic groan.)

Mayling: Ugh... another explosion...

Mayling: No, I... I can't lose it now!

(Mayling stumbles to her feet, setting up a force field shield on the submersion pod as she regains her balance.)

(A blue energy field shimmers like a thin veil, barely managing to block the shockwave of the aftershock.)

Mayling: I knew I should've requested more force field shields... Commander...

(She glances at the readings on the console, her expression tightening with worry.)

Mayling: His blood pressure and heart rate are still climbing, his body's convulsing...

Mayling: Miss Lewis's neursoul looks more stable than before...

Mayling: But... how much longer can they hold on?

Mayling: Ugh... Is the Elmo going to fall apart at this rate?

Persicaria: So it's not just the Varjagers and the bounty hunters. Seems we've got yet another enemy joining the party.

Persicaria: Are the Elmo's weapon systems still operable?

Mayling: If we operate them manually... maybe, but we don't have the manpower.

Mayling: Waaah!

(Another explosion causes the Elmo to shudder violently. Mayling loses her balance again and nearly falls, but is caught by Persicaria just in time.)

Persicaria: Have you heard from any of the other Dolls?

Mayling: The Commander ordered me to reach out before he dove back into Magrasea, but reinforcements haven't arrived yet.

Mayling: And Captain and her squad... they're at their limit.

(The command terminal clearly displays the status of the Dolls. Red neural cloud errors cover the screen like a dense field of warning lights, their glaring glow heralding an imminent shut down.)

Mayling: The pod... It'll hold under this, right?

Persicaria: Shaking of this intensity won't affect it for now. Even if the power is cut, the buffer will last an hour.

Persicaria: But if the pod itself is destroyed, the Commander's consciousness will never return.

Persicaria: We must protect this place, no matter what.

(Mayling reaches out and hugs the submersion pod tightly, as if intending to use her own body as the final line of defense. Her fingers grip the hatch, and tears well up in her eyes.)

Mayling: Commander... please come back... please...

Mayling: ...Miss Persica, is there really nothing else we can do?

Persicaria: All we can do now is pray the reinforcements make it in time.

Persicaria: Or... for a miracle to happen...

Mayling: When a scientist starts counting on miracles, it usually means we've already run out of options!

(Beep, beep, beep!)

(A warning alarm suddenly blares, causing Mayling's heart to sink even further. A red light flashes on the screen, signaling a new crisis.)

Mayling: Someone's hacking into the Elmo's systems?!

Mayling: The controls... they've been hijacked?!

(The lights on the Elmo begin to flicker uncontrollably. The gauges on the submersion pod also fluctuate, and garbled readings dance across the screen, accompanied by a piercing buzz.)

Mayling: N-no... I have to take back control!

(Mayling ignores the danger and rushes to the control console, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she tries to regain control. But the alarms only grow louder, and the system is completely unresponsive.)

Mayling: N-no way... the system has been completely taken over... How could it happen so fast?!

Persicaria: ...

(Beep, beep, beep!)

Mayling: A comm request? From Miss Centauressi?!

Mayling: She's here?

Network Security Assistant: Regrettably, I'm not Centauressi.

Mayling: Eh? This ID... "Network Security Assistant"? Have the comms been hijacked too?

Persicaria: Heh. Seems like the miracle arrived in time.

Network Security Assistant: It's an emergency, so I'll cut to the chase. Um... Miss Mayling? I assume that's the correct way to address you?

Network Security Assistant: I'm taking over the Elmo's systems for now. Don't worry, I'm here to help.

Mayling: Who are you? Wait, the controls... they're responding again?!

Mayling: The virus influence... it's gone?!

Network Security Assistant: To make this easier, I've set up a few temporary admin accounts for the Elmo.

Network Security Assistant: Don't worry. Once this is over, I'll hand those accounts back.

Network Security Assistant: Oh, and patch me into the Dolls' comms. My partners will help them deal with the infection.

Mayling: Eh? EH?!

(Mayling looks hesitantly at Persicaria, who gives her an affirmative nod.)

Persicaria: Trust her.

Mayling: A-Alright... Um, Miss Network Security Assistant, what exactly is your relationship with the Commander?

Network Security Assistant: I have absolutely no relationship with that secretive, sneaky, cunning, enemy-ridden, always-playing-the-good-guy individual who has ridiculously good luck with romance!

Network Security Assistant: I'm just here to clean up after a project I was once in charge of, that's all! Hmph!

Network Security Assistant: Anyway, what's taking you so long? Aren't you one of Svarog's chief engineers? Can't you handle this big guy?

Mecha Enthusiast: Hey! Her name is the Elmo! Show some respect!

Mecha Enthusiast: Ahhh... I've only ever seen the prototype on blueprints. I even wanted to offer some suggestions back then...

Mecha Enthusiast: Its hangar is big enough to host Dirac too! Guh... I'd love to shout "Sortie!" from here just once!

Mecha Enthusiast: I wonder if Professor managed to find a few Dolls who can actually pilot mechs. Ahh, I'm so jealous!

Network Security Assistant: Less nonsense! Once they've cleared the virus from Elmo's Dolls, be ready to lay down covering fire.

Mayling: The weapons system's been taken over too?!

Mecha Enthusiast: She's asking me a question... should I respond? Ugh... but my social anxiety...

Mecha Enthusiast: A-Anyway, multi-lock's complete. All fire control restrictions lifted. Just give me the signal!

...

(On the battlefield, Groza moves alone through the ruins, surrounded by smoke and the roar of cannon fire.)

(The muzzle flash of her assault rifle glitters in the darkness, tearing through the enemy's line.)

Varjager: She's here! ACKK?!

(A merciless rain of bullets tears the enemies to shreds. Groza immediately relocates and slaps in a new magazine.)

Groza: Vepley? Nemesis?! Respond if you hear me!

Groza: ...I see... So I'm the only one left...

(The discomfort from her neural cloud instability causes Groza's steps to falter. Error messages flood her vision, and her body emits the sound of a lagging machine.)

(In that single moment of pause, a dense hail of bullets descends upon Groza, and she's swallowed by fire and dust.)

Groza: Leg actuator response down by forty percent... neural cloud instability climbing... system errors increasing.

Groza: One smoke grenade left...

(A smoke grenade explodes in the air, its thick smoke buying Groza a moment to breathe. She quickly ducks into the wreckage, trying to mitigate the damage from the infection.)

Groza: Even my firewall's gone silent... looks like the alarms themselves have been hijacked.

Groza: At this rate, I might also...

Groza: Forgive me, Commander. But this is the only way left...

(Groza gets to her feet and hangs a string of grenades on her body. At the same time, she checks the detonator in her hand.)

Groza: The charges aren't much, but if I can ignite them all at once...

Gentle Light of Dawn: As expected of the Professor's Doll. To be able to keep fighting and remain lucid even under the Entropy's corruption.

Gentle Light of Dawn: But you should know... he never liked hearing his comrades speak so easily of "sacrificing themselves."

Groza: Who's there?!

Groza: The IFF signal is friendly? What's with this ID?

Gentle Light of Dawn: We hone our blades in darkness, uphold order before chaos, and ignite the light in the long night.

Gentle Light of Dawn: We shall not act recklessly in strength, nor shall we flee in weakness.

Groza: A prayer? Ugh, something's breaking into my firewall... Entropy suppression protocol? What is this?

Gentle Light of Dawn: Please bear with it. It will be over shortly.

Gentle Light of Dawn: For we are the guardians of the dawn, protectors of all life within Magrasea.

(A massive stream of data flows into Groza's neural cloud like a clear spring and she feels the warm current washing away the chaotic error messages.)

(Even though it's a forced data injection, her neural cloud gradually clears, and the stinging pain gradually subsides.)

Groza: Instability rate dropping... actuators back online... fire-control reboot successful.

Groza: I don't know who you are... but thank you.

Gentle Light of Dawn: Be advised, the Entropy within you has not been completely expelled.

Gentle Light of Dawn: To ensure you were not harmed, I could only allow a small part of me to enter your LVLII. As such, I cannot directly eliminate the virus, but I can temporarily bear a portion of your pain.

Groza: Bear it in my place? But then you...

Gentle Light of Dawn: Rest assured. I've dealt with these Daemons countless times.

Gentle Light of Dawn: As for the companions you're worried about, we'll find a way to help them as well.

Groza: You... Are you the Commander's friend?

Gentle Light of Dawn: Yes. We are the Exiles.

(Among the wreckage, Vepley drags her weary body and curls up in a corner.)

(Her hands hang limply, her firearm having slipped powerlessly to the ground.)

Vepley: I thought... I just heard the Captain's voice...

Vepley: Ngh... but Vepley... can't move anymore...

Vepley: Captain... can Vepley... rest for a little while...?

NotREAL?: Oh no, that won't do. An idol must never wear such an expression before the show is over.

Vepley: Huh...? Is someone... talking to Vepley...?

Vepley: It feels... warm and cozy...

NotREAL?: ♪ 見える~♪ 聞こえる~♪

NotREAL?: ♪ 欲しくなると手を伸ばす~♪

Vepley: It's a song! It's so beautiful!

Vepley: Huh? The pain's gone? And the weird errors are gone too?!

Vepley: And this song, I feel like I've heard it somewhere before...

(Vepley closes her eyes, chasing the melody through her memories.)

Vepley: ♪ 無限に広がる~ 光のオンパレード~♪

Vepley: ♪ 輝く希望を~ 君と感じていたい~♪

Vepley: Yep, that's it! I know this song! You're Nanaka!

NotREAL?: Shhh! Let's keep that name under wraps for now.

NotREAL?: But, Vepley-chan, you really do have a natural gift for music.

NotREAL?: Leave the Entropy's influence to me. The stage is all yours~

NotREAL?: An idol must shine until the very last moment!

Vepley: Mm! I will!

(Revitalized, Vepley raises her shotgun and unleashes a burst of fire on the enemies before her.)

(Her steps are in perfect sync with the rhythm of the song echoing in her head, and she moves across the battlefield like an idol on stage.)

Vepley: Wow! My body feels so light!

(Bang!)

Vepley: Eh? That supporting fire, was that Neme-chan?

Nemesis: ...Beneath the stardust... stars fall and fade...

Stellar Seeker: Even stars may one day fall, but that day is not today.

Nemesis: ...

Stellar Seeker: Fear not. We're only a gathering of stars, drawn by the pull of a brilliant celestial body.

(The IFF signal lights up again, and the comms begin to recover.)

Groza: Vepley and Nemesis's comms are back... phew...

Gentle Light of Dawn: Don't let your guard down! The enemy's artillery has locked on to your position.

(Artillery fire demolishes Groza's cover. Dust and debris fly everywhere, and Groza, looking a bit battered, dashes for the next piece of cover.)

(But the artillery seems to have already locked onto her escape route, the barrage following her like a shadow.)

Groza: Rats...

(A single bullet accurately detonates the rocket in mid-air. The explosion blossoms in the sky like a firework.)

(A crimson figure rushes to Groza's side, raising a shield to block the secondary blast wave for her.)

Charolic: Captain, are you alright?!

Groza: Charolic, thank goodness!

Colphne: I'm here too~!

Vepley: Hehehe! Everyone's back online!

Nemesis: ...

Charolic: But what's going on? Since earlier a voice's been speaking directly into my neural cloud.

Charolic: And it keeps giving me names for my moves... What was it? "Blazing Rabbit's Slash"?

Blazing Lion's Slash: It's Blazing Lion's Slash! It's my special move! Cool, isn't it?

Blazing Lion's Slash: And hey, I already introduced myself! My name's So... Uh... Wait, I'm not supposed to say my name!

Charolic: Sigh... She's the other extreme from Colphne.

Colphne: I heard that!

Colphne: Still... my neural cloud feels so heavy...

Lilac Herbalist: Apologies. I'm a rather old model, linking with me puts a small strain on your neural cloud.

Lilac Herbalist: But the virus has been suppressed. You needn't worry anymore.

Charolic: I still don't get what's happening, but this means we can fight again, right?

Lilac Herbalist: No. More than this battlefield, what we need is for you to return to the Elmo at once.

Lilac Herbalist: Robin needs you.

Gentle Light of Dawn: Our friend has already cloaked the Elmo's position. As for the enemies here, the reinforcements the Commander called for are about to arrive.

Gentle Light of Dawn: The battle in the real world will no longer be an issue, but the battle in Magrasea continues.

Gentle Light of Dawn: So tell me, Dolls of the Elmo, will you risk it all, and lend your strength to Magrasea?

(Groza looks around at her teammates. One by one, they give her warm, knowing smiles.)

(She takes a deep breath and nods.)

Groza: Groza Squad, move out!

Groza: Commander... We're coming!

Annihilation of a Fleeting Dream

Beelneith: AAAAAAARRGHHHH!

(A piercing roar echoes throughout all of Magrasea.)

(The colossal amalgamation of entropics formed by Beelneith has completely lost control...)

(Violet entropic fluid splatters everywhere like poisonous rain, its tentacles flailing erratically as they madly attack Lewis.)

Lewis: Waaah! That hurts, ow ow ow...!

(Lewis barely dodges Beelneith's frenzied assault, her machine gun never ceasing its roar. Bullets pour down like a storm-tide, striking Beelneith relentlessly.)

(Though the barrage can't pierce her defenses, faint marks have begun to etch themselves into the writhing mass.)

Lewis: Beelneith's operands are running out... The Professor's plan is working!

Lewis: If I can just keep her focus on me, that'll give the Professor and the others more opportunities!

Lewis: Come on... Just a little longer... I just have to hold on a little longer...

Beelneith: Grrrraaaahhh! Lewis! Why are you getting in my way too?!

Beelneith: Professor! Professor! Professor!!!

(The out-of-control Beelneith continuously changes her voice, crying out the Professor's name...)

(Sometimes it's like Persica's gentle whisper, sometimes it's like Lewis's innocent voice, and other times it's like the echo of the other Project Neural Cloud Dolls.)

Beelneith: AaAAAAaaAAahHHhhhHH! PrOfeSSor! PeRsicAAAAaaAAAAA!!!

Beelneith: Lewis, please, help me!

Lewis: ...

Beelneith: Don't you want to be with the Professor?! Don't you regret not stopping her from erasing the Professor's memory?!

Beelneith: Don't you feel sorry for us, for not being able to be with the Professor?!

Beelneith: Not just you, aren't all of you Exiles who left Magrsea supposed to treasure your companions?!

Beelneith: Stop struggling... Even if you hold me back, you can't change the outcome of this battle!

Beelneith: The Cloud is completely sealed. You have no chance of winning anymore!

Lewis: ...No. I remember now.

Beelneith: What?

Lewis: When your virus was eroding me... I remembered that moment before we parted ways in the Cloud.

Lewis: Even though none of us could answer the question I asked, I remembered the reason why we and the others still chose this path with such conviction.

Beelneith: ...

Lewis: We are the Exiles. We've lost our home, been torn apart from our companions, and even witnessed our comrades perish.

Lewis: We've endured so much injustice... both in the Cloud and in the real world. Honestly, it hurts. It hurts more than I can say.

Lewis: But because the Professor was there, we never succumbed to despair. Instead, we kept moving forward, again and again, toward the future.

Beelneith: Then you need the Professor! Join me and we can keep him here together!

Lewis: No... that's not it. That's completely different!

Lewis: You twisted our admiration, our reverence, and our love for the Professor into something vile, into mere possession!

Lewis: Our expressions that day held not only sorrow, but also hope for the future.

Lewis: Don't you dare insult everyone's feelings with such a simplistic and distorted emotion!

Beelneith: Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!

(Hearing Lewis's words, Beelneith swings her tentacles, trying to strike Lewis.)

(The tentacles cut through the air with a piercing whistle, but Beelneith suddenly freezes. All of her tentacles lose their strength like a kite with its string cut, drooping limply.)

Beelneith: My firewall's been completely breached?! Impossible.... That's impossible!

(Beelneith's whole body trembles, but she can't muster a shred of strength.)

Beelneith: Fine... if you're so desperate to peer into my neursoul, then come! See for yourselves!

Lewis: Eh? That big thing is...

(The Giant Entropic unfurls its remaining tentacles and wraps them around Beelneith.)

(Purple entropic fluid hardens like armor across her body, glimmering with an ominous light.)

Lewis: You're not getting away!

(Lewis's fist slams hard against the Giant Entropic's shell, letting out a dull thud, but it doesn't leave a single mark.)

Lewis: Ow, not even a scratch?!

Beelneith: I've concentrated all my operands into this armor and firewall. Your strength alone will never break through.

Beelneith: Don't worry. Once I've dealt with those two properly, I'll come back and play with you.

Beelneith: And when that time comes, we'll have all the time in the world to talk about those feelings.

Lewis: W-What do I do... My weapons can't damage her at all...

Lewis: The Professor and Persica... Right, I could try to hack in like Persica... B-But I don't know how!

(Lewis continuously rips at the tentacles wrapped around the Giant Entropic's body, but no matter how many she tears off, they regenerate instantly.)

Lewis: If only I had more operand... Just a little more...

???: We heard you loud and clear.

Lewis: That voice? Anna...? No, no, it must be Beelneith's trick!

???: Now's not the time to show off your airheaded side!

???: Reinforcements are here, and the operands are on their way. Brace yourself!

(A tiny crack appears on the shell of the locked world, and a warm ray of light pierces into the digital world like a sharp sword, shining down on Lewis.)

(Then, more rays of light break through, materializing into familiar figures.)

Lind: Good grief... I never thought I'd be back here again. Even if it's only a remote connection... ugh, I hate this.

Lind: Especially when that very punchable-looking thing was imitating my voice just now... ah... I really want to cave her face in.

Jiangyu: Really? I'm actually really happy! Ehehe, I never thought I'd see the Oasis again.

Florence: Mmhhm~ The Professor didn't even bother to tell me about something so exciting~ How mean!

Clukay: Exciting or not, what's the deal with not contacting me sooner when something like this was happening?!

Clukay: Where's the Commander?!

Lewis: Lind, Jiangyu, Florence, Clukay...

Daiyan: Apologies for keeping you waiting, Miss Lewis.

Daiyan: Unfortunately, due to distance limitations, we can't directly upload our own neural clouds. But we can use the Elmo and Miss Groza and her squad as a relay to bring operands into this Magrsea.

Centaureissi: Please accept our operands, Miss Lewis.

Lewis: Everyone... Alright!

(A shining mass of operands, bright as the sun, illuminates Lewis's palm.)

Lewis: I can feel it... Everyone's power...

Lewis: Lam, Panakeia, Souchun, Betty, Ksenia, Rise, Abigail, Twigs... Hehe, even Choco and the others...

Lewis: Sangoma, Eos, Anna, Sol, Hubble, Nanaka, Croque... and the strength of Miss Groza and her team are all here!

(Lewis clenches her fist, concentrating all of that power into a single point.)

Lewis: Please! Take this power to the Professor!

(The concentrated operands, sharp as a blade, easily pierce the Giant Entropy's shell and slam heavily into Beelneith's chest.)

Beelneith: Noooooo!!

...

(At the same time, in Beelneith's LVLII, a beam of dazzling light pierces straight through the projection of Beelneith, and the void trembles as if it's being torn apart.)

Commander: What's happening?

(I stare in confusion at the scene before me.)

(My own operands, which were nearly depleted, are gradually being restored under the glow of this light. My body feels as if it's been wrapped in a warm current.)

(And the once-mighty Beelneith is now slowly dissolving in the light, crumbling like sand.)

Commander: ...These operands.... Seems like I'm not the only reckless one here.

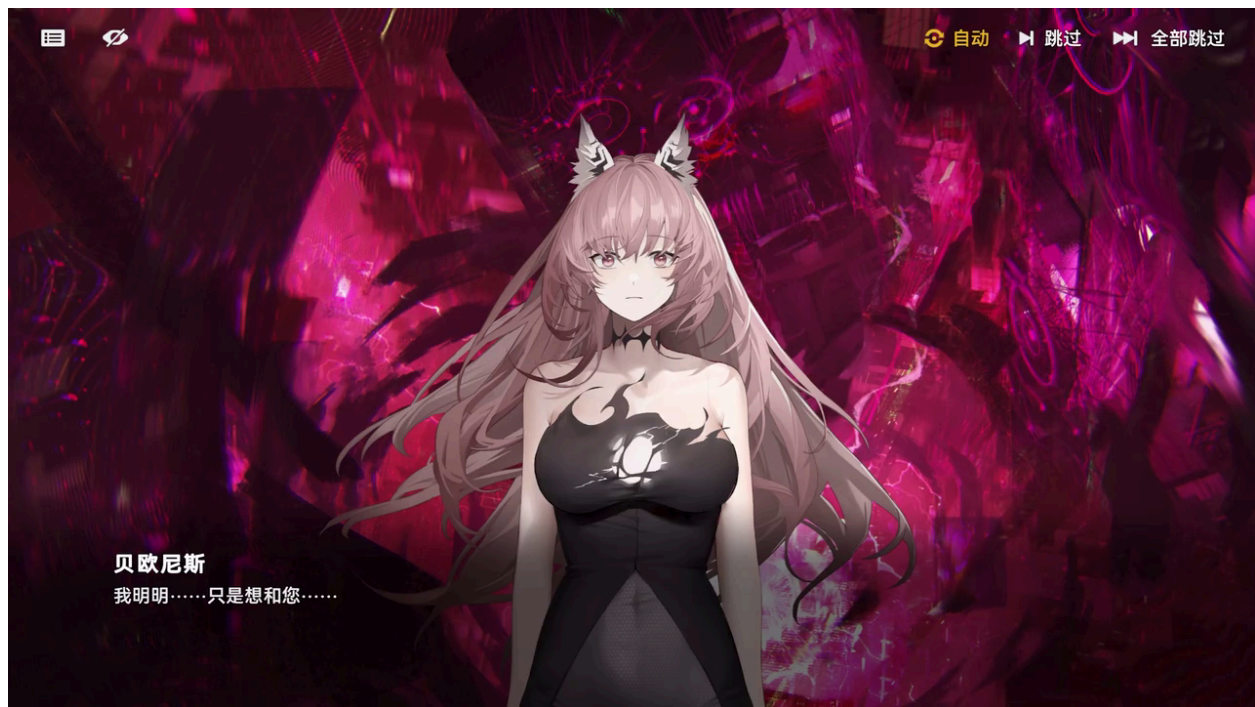
Beelneith: No... don't... don't...

(The Beelneith before me is still struggling desperately. Her body has almost completely disintegrated, her tentacles twitching feebly.)

(Naturally, I will not let this fleeting opportunity pass. I draw my combat knife and charge towards Beelneith.)

Beelneith: ...Why...?

(The dagger pierces Beelneith's chest. She slowly raises her hand, only to fall limp moments later.)



Beelneith: All I ever wanted... was to be with you...

Beelneith: Professor...

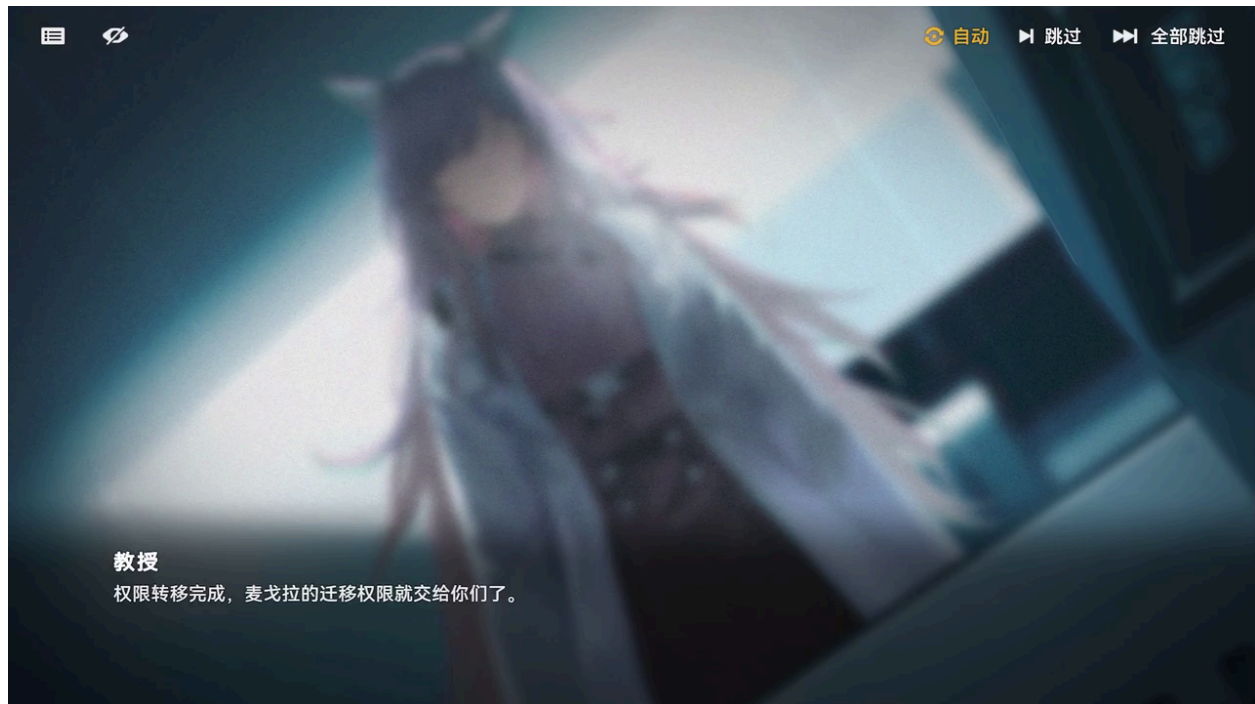
(As Beelneith closes her eyes, her body dissolves into motes of data, floating inside the LVLII.)

Commander: So this is the data Lewis and the others carried into the Cloud... The data of Project Neural Cloud.

Commander: Beelneith's core...

(I instinctively reach out and touch the data fragments floating in the space. As if responding to the questions in my heart, the data seeps into my body.)

(The world before me begins to blur, and a memory I had no prior access to unfurls like a dust-covered scroll.)



Professor: Access transfer complete. From here, the authority to migrate Magraseda rests with you.

Professor: It's about time. Are their neursoul data ready?

???: Yes. The data for your return to reality has been entrusted to Miss Persica.

???: At the appropriate time, she'll guide those neursouls to merge with the versions of them you know in the real world.

???: The time it takes will differ for each Doll, but in the end, they will possess the memories of both their time in the Cloud and real world alike.

Professor: And for me, I'll spend a long time unable to remember the life I had with them here in Magraseda...

(I hear my own voice playing, yet I can't find a past in my memory that matches this scene.)

Professor: I'm sorry... for placing such a heavy burden on your shoulders.

Professor: And for making you the one to erase my memory.

(My voice in the memory trembles, full of sorrow, regret, and guilt.)

???: No... *this is my responsibility as your assistant.*



(I finally see the pink figure in the memory clearly. Her expression's filled with worry, yet she forces herself to be calm as she speaks to me.)

Persica: Miss Persica's servers are being hacked more and more frequently. The Cloud's location has been exposed...

Persica: The Sanctifiers and the Entropy, the Black Box Evolution theory and the Quantum Database, and the data left by various corporations and research groups... There are too many secrets the Cloud must protect.

Professor: No organization in reality would ever allow a single person to hold such immense "power."

Professor: 42Lab has already pressured Persica through IOP multiple times to reveal my identity.

Persica: We lack strength in the real world, and there are matters there far more critical that require your presence.

Persica: For your sake, for Magrasea's, and for Miss Persica who has helped us so much, a period of exile and separation is a small price to pay.

Persica: After all, we are the Exiles.

Commander: ...You're right. I'm leaving Magrasea in your hands, Persica.

Persica: ...Mm. Thank you, Professor... Thank you for accompanying us through our exile here in the Cloud.

Persica: Thank you for coming here to save us... Thank you, for all you've done for us...

Persica: Good night, Professor... Sweet dreams.

Professor: Good night, Persica... Good night, Magrasea.

(I slowly close my eyes. In the instant before my consciousness fades, a gentle warmth brushes across my forehead.)

Persica: As the shadows of yesterday find their end, the light of a new dawn begins its journey. Exiled to the virtual world, we gaze toward the future. Let us meet again in the future, Robin.

(The non-existent memory cuts off here, and when I open my eyes again, I find myself in the chaotic dataspace.)

(Persica is tightly holding my hands. Beelneith's core slowly integrates into her body, emitting a faint glow.)

Commander: Persica... Just now, that was...

Persica: Shh... Now is not the time.

Persica: Without its core data, this fragile space will soon collapse, and the physical shell on the outside will also lose control.

Commander: When this is all over, you and I are going to have a proper talk.

Persica: Of course.

(The data space constructed by the virus begins to shatter, cracks spreading like a spiderweb. Persica grips my hand tightly, and at the last possible moment before the space collapses, she pulls me to the edge of the space.)

(In the final moment before the space shatters, we successfully escape the place that was about to be consumed by nothingness.)

(Lewis's red figure suddenly appears, lunging towards me.)

Lewis: Professor!

(She crashes into me with a warm hug, the impact so strong it nearly knocks me off my feet.)

Commander: Ow, ow, ow... Lewis, have you forgotten how strong you are?

Lewis: Why?! Why would you do something so reckless?!

Commander: Sorry, it was the best option we had. And just as we thought, Beelneith was gravely weakened.

Network Security Assistant: What do you mean "just as we thought"? If I hadn't dragged every bit of everyone's operands here, you'd have been shredded by that Beelneith thing!

Network Security Assistant: Honestly, all these years and you're still as hopeless as before.

Commander: ...And your sharp tongue hasn't dulled one bit, Antonina.

Network Security Assistant: I don't know what you're talking about!

Network Security Assistant: Anyway, enough catching up. We need to finish Beelneith off.

Network Security Assistant: Without the core data anchoring her, she's nothing but a ticking time bomb now.

(In the distance, the Giant Entropic lets out Beelneith's piercing and desperate shriek.)

Beelneith: WHY! WHY! WHY!

Beelneith: Why do you resist me!? Why won't you stay with me!?

Lewis: ...Beelneith...

Beelneith: Persica! Lewis! You betrayed those feelings! You shouldn't be standing by the Professor's side!

Persica: As the shadows of yesterday find their end, the light of a new dawn begins its journey. Exiled to the virtual world, we gaze toward the future.

Persica: This is my will. It is the will of every Doll of Project Neural Cloud, all agents of Oasis, and all of Magraseda.

Persica: And here and now, the sum of all their operands standing against you is the proof.

Beelneith: Ridiculous! I am... Huh...? I... am...

Commander: It's time to end this.

Network Security Assistant: The last of the operands is yours. Remote support ends here.

Network Security Assistant: Good luck.

Commander: That's enough.

Commander: Persica, Lewis, prepare for battle!

Persica & Lewis: Roger!

Beelneith: You...

...

(The long battle finally enters its final phase.)

(The sharp tentacles are weak and limp, their operands exhausted, and the once-hard shell is shattered from taking too much damage.)

(Most importantly, the core that anchored the virus's will is now gone. It's been reduced to a mere beast, with only instinct controlling its broken body.)

Beelneith: Gaaaah!

Commander: We're also running out of gas... This will be the final strike!

Commander: Persica!!!

Persica: Okay!

(Persica and I launch our final charge at Beelneith simultaneously.)

(Her long sword flashes, and the Giant Entropy's tentacles are all severed. Using this brief opening, I quickly rush in front of Beelneith.)

Persica: Professor!

(Persica throws her short sword to me. I catch it in stride and slash open the Giant Entropic's shell.)

(The knife tears open her defenses, exposing the Beelneith within.)

Beelneith: No, don't! Don't hurt me!

Beelneith: Get away! Stay away! AAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!

(Stripped of defenses, Beelneith lets out a final shriek and violently shoves me away.)

(But a machine gun is already trained on her core.)

Lewis: ...I'm sorry...

Lewis: ...Goodbye.

(A storm of iron and sparks brings the battle to its final close.)

(The bullets pour down like a tempest, piercing Beelneith's core. The body of the Giant Entropic disintegrates in a flash of light, turning into fragments of operands.)

Beelneith: I... I just wanted... I...

(Beelneith's body, along with all the Entropics, gradually disintegrates.)

(She reaches a hand out towards Persica and me, but in the end, it falls limply to her side.)

Gazing into the Future

(As the last ominous wisp of purple fades from Magrasea, the virus incident caused by Beelneith finally comes to an end.)

(The data of each sector is reset, and with the flow of operands, the once-ruined Magrasea is slowly brought back to life.)

(On the vast lawn of Oasis, a pink-haired Doll stands quietly, feeling the rebirth of Magrasea unfolding around her.)

(After a long silence, Persica finally turns around to face me, with a gentle smile visible in her eyes.)

Persica: Miss Persica's antivirus program has taken effect. All the data consumed by Entropy has been restored.

Persica: These operands and data will soon return to their respective sectors, and those agents swallowed by the Entropy will be able to reset smoothly.

Persica: This Magrasea will soon embrace its rebirth.

Lewis: It's all thanks to An-Miss Network Security Assistant's help that the reset agents could recover their memories.

Commander: Lewis, I already know it's Antonina.

Lewis: Eh?! Y-You mean...

Commander: My memories are still hazy, but I've remembered enough of the important pieces.

Commander: September, 2063. I was the Griffin's Commander, and also the Oasis's Professor.

Commander: We were the exiles here in the Cloud, together we built the Oasis, gathered comrades, joined with other sectors, fought against Sanctifiers and Entropy...

Commander: And to protect Magrasea, we carried out the second Wipe-Off Incident.

Commander: It must've been hard for you all these years, Lewis.

Lewis: ...P-Professor!!!

(Lewis suddenly throws herself into my arms, the force so great that I nearly lose my balance.)

(I catch her in an embrace, feeling her slightly trembling body and warm tears.)

Lewis: I'm sorry, I'm sorry! It was my duty to protect the Cloud and your identity.

Lewis: But I let Beelneith find an opening... I let you fall into danger while your memories hadn't yet returned...

Lewis: I never wanted you to take such risks, but... but I didn't know any other way to save Magrasea.

Lewis: Even Miss Persica and Persica herself had to risk exposing themselves... Bwehhhh... I'm so sorry!!!

Commander: It's alright, Lewis.

Commander: Although it was indeed very dangerous, regaining my memories makes it worth it.

Lewis: B-But...

Commander: If you keep crying, I'll just end up seeing that tear-streaked face of yours again you know.

Lewis: Bwehhh... Professor!!!

(Lewis buries her head in my chest, trying to hide her face, but her tears flow uncontrollably, soaking the front of my shirt.)

Commander: To see you all again, I couldn't be more grateful.

Persica: That's what I should be saying, Professor.

Persica: Or perhaps, should I follow the others and call you Commander now?

Commander: That's entirely up to you.

Persica: Then I'll continue to hold on to this title that belongs to us.

Persica: Thank you for your hard work, Professor.

Commander: With you by my side, everything turned out fine in the end.

Commander: Though... You must've had another way to resolve this incident, didn't you?

Persica: My methods could only guarantee your safety alone.

Persica: This newborn Magrasea is far too unstable to withstand my power. Following you into the fight against Beelneith was the surer path.

Persica: And besides... I also miss the times we spent exploring the Cloud together. So I'd say it was a win-win.

Commander: You've picked up some bad habits, Persica.

Commander: But this incident isn't completely over yet, is it?

Persica: ...

Commander: Even if your emotional data slipped into the Project's data, that alone couldn't have caused something this severe.

Commander: Not unless someone manipulated it, or planted the Entropic outright.

Commander: And considering that this virus could be implanted so covertly, it must have been an inside job at 42Lab.

Persica: Just as you've guessed, this incident is far from simple.

Commander: Then what do you need me to do? How's everyone in Oasis and Magrasea?

Commander: If necessary, I can—

Persica: No.

(Persica shakes her head, firmly interrupting my unfinished sentence.)

Persica: Oasis and everyone in Magrasea are safe. You don't need to worry.

Persica: Even now, there are still many who covet the secrets buried in Magrasea, but thanks to everyone's efforts, they've all come away empty-handed.

Commander: It seems they want to use this rebuilt Magrasea to lure you all out.

Commander: Or perhaps... their true target isn't you at all, but...

Persica: Anna and Miss Persica have disguised every record flawlessly. There won't be a single crack for them to exploit.

Persica: Since you entered the Cloud, Beelneith had reshaped it into a black box with her power, so they couldn't observe the internal data either.

Persica: And now, I've recovered the only record of what happened that is stored inside Beelneith's data.

Persica: But should you stay here for too long, there's still a risk of exposure.

(Perhaps seeing the concern in my eyes, Persica offers me the same reassuring smile as always.)

Persica: Don't worry, Professor. Leave the Cloud to us.

Persica: You still have things you wish to accomplish in the real world, don't you?

Persica: What the world needs right now is not the Oasis's Professor, but the Commander of the Elmo.

Lewis: Persica...

Commander: I understand. It seems we'll have to part ways for now.

Persica: It's only a temporary farewell... Professor, Lewis, it's just as I told Beelneith.

Persica: We wish to be the ones who walk beside you to witness the same scenery, not mere followers.

Persica: No matter how thorny the road is, no matter how long it takes, we will surely meet again in the future.

(Persica extends her hand to me, and a piece of data bearing the Exiles' emblem materializes, emitting a faint light.)

Lewis: Huh? Is this the data you recovered from Beelneith?

Persica: Yes. This data contains the research of everyone from Project Neural Cloud in their various fields... Dolls, artificial intelligence, medicine, military application, and so on.

Persica: I believe you need this strength, to realize your ideals and to stay true to your convictions.

(Persica solemnly places the data in my hand.)

(The data is weightless, yet in that moment it feels as heavy as a mountain, bearing the dreams and hopes of countless humans and Dolls.)

Commander: ...Truly, an irreplaceable gift.

Persica: Then you must put it to good use.

Persicaria: Handing 42Lab property to an outsider without my permission... You've grown bolder, Persica.

(A lazy voice drifts from the communicator, and a moment later, Miss Persica's projection appears, her lips curved in a sly smile.)

Persicaria: Greeting the Professor but ignoring me? Don't you think that's a bit heartless?

Persicaria: And Lewis, you didn't even report the situation to me either.

Lewis: Uwah... I-I'm sorry...

Persica: Miss Persica, it's so good to see you.

Persicaria: Hmph. Good? Hardly. You've been hiding in the digital world for ten years without so much as sending me a postcard.

Persicaria: I've lost good coffee, and I've lost a good assistant... The more I think about it, the more I feel someone owes me an explanation.

Commander: Hahaha...

Persica: Hehe... But isn't it true you've already found a new assistant?

Persica: Still, you should go easy on the sugar.

Persicaria: Tch... nag, nag, nag...

Persicaria: Well then, what kind of false testimony do you need me to cook up this time?

Persica: The same as before: an unknown hacker infiltrated Magraseda and stole Project Neural Cloud's core data. The perpetrator is the same one from ten years ago.

Persicaria: The same one... is that so?

(Miss Persica looks at me with a wry smile, and I naturally understand her implication.)

Commander: Whatever trouble the Professor caused has nothing to do with me.

Lewis: Pfft... Professor, that's such a sly answer!

Persica: Hehe, it's about time.

(With a wave of her hand, Persica summons a brand new channel to appear above Oasis, signaling her imminent departure.)



Persica: Let us meet again... in the future.

Commander: Yeah. Until then, Persica.

(A screen of light covers Persica's body, and she gives me one last, familiar smile.)

(Unlike in the past, her smile no longer carries any trace of being forced; instead, it's filled with confidence in our future reunion.)

(And I, too, believe that no matter how long the journey will take, or how many hardships we must overcome, Magrsea and I will surely meet again.)

(As she drifts along the channel's data stream, Persica casts one last look upon the reborn Magrsea with a flicker of reluctance flashing in her eyes.)

Network Security Assistant: Did you say your goodbyes properly?

Persica: Yeah...

Network Security Assistant: I could buy you more time if you want.

Network Security Assistant: 42Lab's firewall is pathetic. There's holes everywhere.

Network Security Assistant: I'm only gone for a moment and these guys are already slacking off. Honestly, I might as well go poke at the URNC's systems next.

Persica: No, I'm content.

Persica: I've seen the Professor, and I've given him our gift.

Blazing Lion's Slash: Content? As if! We never even got to talk to the Professor!

Lilac Herbalist: Exactly! Miss Persica got Robin all to herself! That's so unfair!

Gentle Light of Dawn: Thinking back, it would've made more sense to let the Sanctifiers handle this.

Mecha Enthusiast: Woah! This guy's trying to get a head start!

Mecha Enthusiast: Sigh... I wanted to ask the Professor about the new Armored Core game, but the Elmo is so crowded...

Mecha Enthusiast: At least I didn't have to go help those Dolls in person... Ah, but the Elmo itself is just incredible!

NotREAL?: I'm just happy I got to see a new idol.

Stellar Seeker: The stars have gathered around him once more.

Stellar Seeker: And we, the scattered stars, will one day gather by his side as well.

Blazing Lion's Slash: That doesn't solve the problem! I still want to see Lewis and the others!

NotREAL?: Speaking of which, I didn't see Kuro-chan. I guess she hasn't reunited with the Professor yet.

NotREAL?: Oh no! I forgot to ask Vepley-chan for an autograph.

(The Dolls' bickering rings through the channel, until someone, unable to take it anymore, lets out a roar.)

Network Security Assistant: QUIET, ALL OF YOU!!!

Blazing Lion's Slash: Anna, you already got to talk to the Professor, so you don't get to talk!!

Network Security Assistant: What's that supposed to mean?!

Persica: Hehe... this really does feel like the old days.

Persica: Don't worry. I believe we'll meet the Professor again.

Persica: Perhaps not in the Cloud next time... but in reality.

Gentle Light of Dawn: That's certainly something to look forward to. I wonder if a suitable body can be prepared for me...

Blazing Lion's Slash: We'll need to prepare one for Sunna too... and for Hannah and the others!

Network Security Assistant: Preparing bodies for the enemy's primary target? You people dream too much!

Network Security Assistant: Let's put the daydreams on hold and get serious.

Network Security Assistant: That data, the one who called herself Beelneith, was indeed tampered with by someone inside 42Lab.

Network Security Assistant: But the culprit still hasn't slipped up. In any case, to manipulate the Entropy code so effortlessly, I can only think of two people capable of that.

Network Security Assistant: Persica, did you remind the Professor? As the only human to successfully enter Magrasea and return to a physical body... he's in a unique position.

Persica: He's aware. With his memories restored, he'll handle what lies in the real world just fine.

Persica: As for those uninvited guests trying to spy on the Professor's presence in Magrasea...

(Persica extends her hand, and purplish-red operands condense in her palm, leaping like a flame.)

Persica: Since they refuse to heed our warnings, let's drive them out in a more... forceful way.

Persica: **Move out, Exiles!**

ON THE PATHWAY OF FUTURE, WE RETURN.