

The Corpse of Doku The Maid

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Doku's arm fell off, halting the band's rehearsal. Her drumstick wobbled on the floor, and a ribbon of wires unraveled from her shoulder, loosening the stitches. There was an uncanny lack of blood and viscera as low-poly fluids dripped like a leaky faucet. Her comrades all stared at her.

"Oi, hold yourself together," said Fuhai, muffling through her gas mask.

"That's not nice," mumbled Yume.

Duct tape covered Doku's stitched flesh from head to toe. Golden eyes peered through the wrappings. She had moppy silver hair and wore a black and gold maid uniform matted in dry blood and oil. Two thick, hard drives stuck out of her cranium— conduits programmed to hold her software together. She often needed to replace old limbs when they went bad. Drumming wore them out even faster.

"I need new parts."

Kowaii's neon pink eyes pierced through the dark like an owl, shrinking in on Doku's fallen limb. The bassist's raven hair dragged behind her feet and cloaked her pink and black maid uniform.

"So, are you done with it?" Kowaii asked.

"Duh."

Blinking eyes spawned in Kowaii's shadow. Two-dimensional tendrils slithered from her spot and latched onto the arm before a mouth opened like a trap door. A cacophony of harsh-whispered moans of joy drifted in the air.

Fuhai, their vocalist, huffed a haze of smoke from her cig, the chemicals iridescent. Wispy fumes drifted through the mask filters, which did little to filter anything. Fuhai's bowl-cut brunette hair was frazzled from headbanging and stage thrashing. Her camouflage maid uniform had nearly undone itself, sagging like a falling tent on her skinny body.

"I usually don't care, but where do you get parts, anyway?"

Doku tied a knot with her loose wires so they wouldn't drag. "I hunt for them."

Fuhai coughed smoke. Her mask echoed. "Really? Gross."

"Where else would I get them?"

"I don't know. I thought they were prosthetics with makeup. You don't even smell."

"I can't assimilate prosthetics, they must possess living remnants."

"Virusware is fucked," Fuhai huffed another drag of synthetic smoke.

Doku hopped off the stage. The red exit sign glowed in the lonely theater. "I'll be back before the show," she said.

The Corpse Maid's shadow rippled as Kowaii spawned out of it into a walk. A crooked smile stretched on her face.

"I'll come with you."

"You don't have to, seriously. It'll be dangerous."

"That's the point. It sounds like fun."

“Me too!” Yume chimed. She slid off the stage’s ledge like a small child. Her blue maid uniform caught on the lights, and she tumbled off with a clatter. She shot back up as if nothing had happened, whipping blonde hair out of her face. “You two might get into trouble,” she said.

“Yeah, well I’ll stay here. Have fun grave-digging,” Fuhai said dryly. She sat crisscrossed, materialized out of her inventory a hookah, and put her mouth to it, inhaling asphalt vapors.

The three maids exited the theater into a concrete desert littered with beaten cars and invasive weeds. A blanket of smog blocked most sunlight as rays leaked through. Grey skeletons of great cities veiled the horizon, emitting no light or sound. Doku’s golden eye rolled out of its socket like a reverse-action pool ball. It shattered on the ground.

A shadow mouth ate the glittering pieces. “Now you can’t keep both eyes on the prize.”

“That’s not nice!” Yume whined.

Sluggishly, Doku materialized her map UI. The IP addresses of servers and their domains changed like the weather. It was always in flux. Doku stole parts in the Slum Swamp from dormant users who hadn’t awakened in the Nexus in years. There was a good chance no one would miss them. They’d have to return before the servers shifted again and be lost indefinitely.

Monolithic towers laid over like dominoes, though some never touched the ground. The maids could climb on the whirls of blown debris to the top. The buildings could be destroyed or stable until they entered inside like an atom in superposition.

People frozen in obsidian stood flickering and screaming their last words. Doku would break the limbs off of their avatars, but their code was charred. Yume aimed her Tokarev pistol,

decorated with red roses, and shot playing cards. The charred bodies shattered like glass. Now they could rest.

“Ship of Theseus,” Kowaii said out of the blue.

Bang.

“What?” Doku raised her voice over gun shockwaves echoing in the city.

“It’s a thought experiment a Scholar of Zoogole taught me.”

“Never heard of it.”

“If you replace a ship’s part one at a time, you eventually replace every part. Is it the same ship?”

Bang.

“The... crew makes the ship, right? The soul?” Yume chimed in.

“But people change, too,” said Doku.

“Your body is like the ship, Doku,” said Kowaii. “How many parts have you replaced?”

“Ask the thousands of dormant users I’ve assimilated. Do I seem any different to you?”

Kowaii smiled cryptically. “Maybe.”

When Doku was younger, with less RAM and terraflops, she dug up graves. She was often too weak to break the firewall programs in the tombstones, which warded off her virusware.

Kowaii’s shadows manipulated the programming. The tendrils lifted the tombstones and dumped the limbs Doku needed out of the caskets like treasure.

“You’d disappear without me.”

“We’re lost,” said Kowaii.

“I know where I’m going.”

The buildings were much shorter now. They marched through a neighborhood groped by weeds and rust. Yume played some licks. Her melancholy tune kept dead silence from falling upon them, even though her guitar looked taller than her.

“When was the last time you plugged an update into your map module?” Kowaii inquired.

Doku hesitated to answer. “When did we play in the Harajuku server again?” Her confidence fell apart faster than her body might.

“Unbelievable.”

The servers shifted faster than Doku had anticipated. It was abnormal, even for anomalies. The city they left behind disappeared from the horizon. Not from a distance, but it glitched out of sight entirely. They couldn’t go back the way they came. The maids were like rats in a maze that added new walls every second. The exit always changed.

“Poor little ones,” said a reverberated jingle.

A jarring frequency jolted the maids. Yume stopped playing. Even Kowaii’s shadow eyes failed to sense its presence until it “spoke.” It sounded nothing like words, but they somehow understood its tone. They glanced atop the shambled house to their left. Just under the 64-bit moon laid a smiling raccoon, on his side, resting his chin on his hand with one leg arched suggestively.

“It’s dangerous to traverse the Nexus without updated maps. Fortunately for you, I’m more than happy to do business.” A blank box next to his head filled with text as he talked. His toothy grin didn’t change, open, or falter.

“We’ll find our own way,” said Kowaii, with a look that said *thanks anyway*.

She turned, but the raccoon’s smiling head popped out of a mailbox. Kowaii’s shadow tentacles flared up, and her pink eyes flickered. Annoyed.

“I think we got off on the wrong *paw*,” said the raccoon.

“We don’t have much money,” Doku lied. Thousands of coins were in her account. “But how much are you selling for?”

“Not a coin,” said the raccoon. This time, his noise came from behind them as he floated out of a manhole. He stood on his short legs, taller than Yume but still shorter than Kowaii and Doku.

“You’re big for a raccoon,” said the blue maid. She fixed her posture to appear bigger. “So, what do you want?”

The raccoon held out his hand like wanting a tip, an odd-looking handshake. “I’m Dew. Your name, please?”

Doku shook his hand. “You *may* call me ‘Moku The Daid.’”

She didn’t hand over her name with permission, but she mispronounced it just in case. It worked; the raccoon couldn’t take it. Dew cursed in Russian, evidenced by the Cyrillic in the text box.

“Nice try, Fae, but no,” said Doku.

Fae were brokers. If she gave him her name or identifying information, he could overload her with bloatware and use her as a walking data farm. Everything takes in the Nexus.

“What do you need your name for, anyway? In this decaying internet, nothing is truly ours. We should share and borrow what we can. Don’t be selfish.”

“Or,” said Doku.

Kowaii and Yume glared at the raccoon. Shadows writhed, and gun mags clicked. Doku materialized her chainsaw. She was bluffing. Doku wanted to avoid violence with live users if she could.

“You can just give us the map information.”

Dew wriggled his finger. “Ah, ah, ah, my map updates are inscribed in my software. If I go, it goes.”

The maids lowered their weapons. Doku wished not to give the fae her name. Not because of its value. She didn’t know what would happen if her virusware merged with a living user. But he wouldn’t give up the map update otherwise. Her comrades depended on her for direction, and she hated being useless.

“Time’s ticking. I can find another customer.”

“Okay, have it your way.”

“Excellent,” Dew offered his hand. “Your name, please?”

“Don’t do it, Doku,” said Kowaii, her shadows writhing. “I can extract the data from him.”

“I’ll delete it before you touch me,” said Dew.

Doku’s duct tape bandaged hand stopped Kowaii. “I’ll be fine. Trust me.”

Kowaii’s shadows swayed like seaweed in a whirlpool, eager to rip the fae a thousand holes it never wanted. Confidence burned in her eyes. Alas, she grumbled, and her shadows shrank. “Fine.”

She took Dew’s hand. “Doku The Maid.”

His body emitted blue light as phantom tendrils encoded with ones and zeros latched onto Doku. The contract was sealed. She shivered as his programming buried itself in her software, searching through her history.

“You play so much ruckus. You call that music?” He mumbled. His UI hologram was faint, scrolling through files like a slot machine. His eyes lit up— he had found what he was looking for. “Hey, so you do have money!”

Doku emitted yellow light, and bits of her virus entity spread through the phantom data channels to the fae. His eyes filled with yellow noise static. He held his head and shrilled.

“What the hell are you?” he screamed.

The yellow light overtook his blue hue. Dew’s eyelids scrolled through more data than he could process. His limbs contorted and phased through his body.

“There’s too many of you!”

A million tiny Dokus danced inside his eyes, scrambling his neural networks, kicking, and severing synapses. They played drums on his files until they ripped apart. He fell over and twitched like a squashed bug.

“Heh,” Kowaii scuffed. She kicked his misshapen polygon body while he was down. “Fae piss me off. Scheming freeloaders.”

Yume kicked him a few times. “Not so big now, are ya?”

Doku giggled— her friend’s inverse bravery-to-danger ratio amused her. A ping popped on Doku’s map UI. She assimilated the update from the fae. All it cost her was his life in the Nexus and another screaming voice in her head. The fae’s body disintegrated into pixels under the force of the maids’ boots. It seemed like a waste, but his avatar was too small anyway. She needed more substance than a lowly fae.

Kowaii turned to Doku. “You good?”

“I know the way out of here. Let’s go.”

The Slum Swamp spanned hundreds of domains, a lattice of shambled shelters connected by thin roads of plank bridges. The neighborhood rested on the trunks of data trees that saw better summers since their flowers blossomed with updates. Now their branches hung withered. Wood creaked under the maids’ feet. Echoes bubbled from the waters below, audio files lost to time, making their last sounds.

Quiet houses had the highest chance of a dormant user belonging to someone who died or abandoned the Nexus. But all the houses were silent, with nobody inside.

“It’s like a ghost server,” Yume whimpered.

Yume tugged Kowaii’s hair. She was too short to reach her hand. An eye slithered on her fingers, and she jerked away.

“This isn’t normal,” said Doku.

“Normal is boring. This is getting interesting.”

Kowaii’s eyes slithered in stretches of shadows across the dark web bayou. They scattered like rats, wriggling through every crevice. Her glowing, scarlet eyes flickered.

“I found one.”

Kowaii glided on a bed of shadows, and the others followed.

The house she found emitted no sound. Doku couldn’t have told the difference from the others, but Kowaii sensed a dormant user resting inside. The door was locked with tier-six encryption. Expensive security, although no match for Doku’s virus, but it was strange seeing this tech in such an impoverished place.

Doku materialized her chainsaw. She yanked the revving string with her teeth, hard without a hand, but her undead strength forced the rugged engine to roar. She tore inside, breaking the chains of code that kept the encryption intact. Splinters littered everywhere inside the house.

Kowaii flew through the halls, leading Doku and Yume into a room where a frog avatar lay asleep in bed with a humanoid feline avatar beside him. Her cat ears turned like satellite discs as the maids entered, and her tail was frightened stiff. Doku looked at her username and it read “Nekoi.”

Shadows sprouted on the walls like a demon possessing the house. “Hand over that dormant user.”

Nekoi jumped to her feet and stood in the maids’ way, spreading her arms. “No, get away from him, he’ll log on any day!”

Kowaii’s infestation of eyes swarmed the frog user’s bed. His username read “Koopa.”

“He hasn’t logged on in 5 years. He’s never coming back.”

Doku’s chainsaw chewed air, hungry to slice up limbs. Nekoi blocked the maids from her sleeping friend. She was prepared to defend him, even if it risked her place in the Nexus, and she would never see him again.

“We’re leaving,” said Doku.

“What? But we can take them!”

Doku walked out of the room.

“Where are you going? Doku!” Kowaii yelled. Her swarm of eyes left Koopa alone as she followed her.

Yume solemnly bowed her head to Nekoi and joined the others.

In the living room, GIFs of Nekoi and Koopa plastered the walls behind frames stamped with colorful pins of emoticons and PNG art, shifting in place, forever looping an animation. If she had assimilated Koopa, would this be all that's left of him?

"Why did you let him go? He was yours," Kowaii asked.

"I prefer not to cause more pain just to sustain myself."

"No. You just don't want more ghosts," said Kowaii. "I get it...But I don't want to see you disappear either."

Yume whined, but her tone agreed.

"You shouldn't have come. This was all pointless," Doku said. "I'm the most useless maid in the group because every part of me is disposable."

"But there's one part of you that's irreplaceable," said Kowaii.

"What? The virus?" Doku snapped. "Maybe it's best that rots, too."

Doku hurled and coughed out one of her lungs. It forced its way out of her mouth like a slug and *splattered* on the floor. The floorboards rattled— a pincher claw broke through and seized the quivering organ. A bellowing roar shook the house.

Kowaii looked in every direction. Her eyes were in every corner, blinking from the shadows. "Something's coming."

"What is it?" Yume shifted left and right.

Doku pulled her chainsaw's string with her teeth.

Scaly men crawled on the wooden beams from the deep web bayou. Sludge dripped off their catfish whiskers, and angular lanterns drooped over their beady black eyes. Their heads were fish, but with crustacean arms and legs, they clung to the house like insects. They peered through the windows. Their maws hung open and spewed scandalous offers.

“Congratulations, you’ve won!”

“Spam-Sirens,” said Doku. “Predatory AI. They lure victims with their bogus offers. They must have eaten the other users on this server. It’s an infestation.”

“And you destroyed the security code, keeping them out. Great job. No, really, I’m impressed,” said Kowaii.

A wave of Spam-Sirens poured themselves inside. Doku charged at one and stabbed her chainsaw’s spinning teeth right into its torso, spray-painting chunky, poorly rendered green gore on the wall.

“Your CPU has a virus! Download our scanning software now!”

Kowaii hadn’t moved a muscle. Her shadows prioritized her, choking several Sirens, throttling them with dark tendrils until they stopped spasming.

“Hot single moms in your area want to meet you!”

Yume materialized two single-barrel automatic shotguns in both hands, decorated with white rabbits in red coats, and blasted anything that got close to her. Each pellet casing released white rabbits. The supersonic bunnies punched clean holes through the Spam-Sirens’ fragile bodies. The fallen ammo exploded inside their bodies, rocketing their limbs everywhere. More deep web creatures kept crawling over the lifeless piles.

Kowaii looked to her right. “Doku, the room!”

Doku nodded and ran down the hall. She burst through the door. Spam-Sirens surrounded Koopa. Nekoi was swiping her claws at them and left bloody scratches across their scales until a Spam-Siren caught her arm and gripped the other. Its face got close. Nekoi flinched, and her face went green.

“This pill will add 7 inches!”

Doku swung her chainsaw and cut the fish's head off. A geyser of pixelated grume squirted out of its neck, and its grip loosened from Nekoi.

A Siren lunged at Doku from across the bed. She caught it on her chainsaw like a kabob, but she missed one, and a claw crushed her leg.

“Doctors HATE him! Use this one weird trick!”

It tore her leg off. Doku shrieked. It hurt when she lost parts through violence, not at all like when her arm fell off on its own. The siren on her chainsaw reached forward and yanked off her arm like a demented toddler playing surgeon with a doll. They bit into her flesh, taking gigabytes at a time, code bleeding out. She was devoured until her hard drives remained.

Yume arrived— too late. She killed them both, one shotgun each. Kowaii’s shadows followed, strangling the rest.

“Doku...” whimpered Yume. Her shoulders slumped, and her guns lost their combat austerity and slumped too.

“She saved us...” said Nekoi, sounding confused.

“Oh my Dev, save your tears,” said Kowaii. “We have plenty of fresh parts now.”

Her shadows searched the house for scraps of the butchered sirens. Kowaii stitched Doku’s body back together with meticulous care, sowing cables through scaly flesh. She placed a fish’s head on top. But when she jammed the hard drives inside, uploading her virusware, pixels blurred the body and assimilated into Doku, still wrapped in wires.

“You’d disappear without me.”

Yume hugged her zombie friend. Doku patted her head.

“I appreciate your help, whatever you are, but it feels weird thanking you,” said Nekoi.

“We did break in,” Doku replied honestly.

“Yeah, you did.”

Guilt did weigh heavily on Doku’s heart, but helping a live user gave her a high unlike any of Fuhai’s drugs. The voices in her head were quieter than usual. Then someone moaned.

Koopa wiped sleep away and sat up. He’d finally logged on. “Whoa, what the hell?”

Nekoi dove into the bed to hug him so hard his eyes might’ve popped. She purred. “I waited 5 years for you to return.”

They embraced each other.

Koopa rubbed Neko’s fur, confused tears streaming. “I’m sorry. I forgot my password when dreaming.”

Yume glanced up at Doku. “Hey, you’re still missing your right eye.”

“Oh,” she poked her finger inside the ocular cavity. “I suppose I am.”

“I got you,” said Kowaii. Her shadows latched onto Koopa’s face and ripped out his eye.

The maids returned to the theater server. Fuhai cooked glitchy and prismatic *angel dust* under bubbling tubes. Her eyes were swirling with colors. “Comrades, welcome back. Got your arm?”

“I feel like a new maid,” said Doku.

“Sick.” Fuhai presented bags of iridescent powder. “Snort this. Let’s fucking melt faces.”

The wave of Avatars rippled to the heart-shuddering bass and air-ripping guitar riffs. Shirtless people thrashed each other in the mosh pit. Their souls were at the mercy of the morbid, melancholy melodies of the maids. Fuhai’s scream moved over and through them.

*“Consuming ourselves to light the way for others
Get too close, and we’ll burn through your scars,
Come with us and smolder in the dirt!
We were born to burn!”*