Guardians
Volume One
The Phantom

A novel by Gary Leung
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A story by
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I swear to protect all that I hold dear.

I will protect all humans of Earth, my family, my friends, even my enemies.

I will serve Earth with best of my abilities.

Humanity’s innocence is secured by me.

My duty is my best kept secret until humanity reaches puberty.

I will consider the value of my life as secondary, under any circumstances, compared to those whom I swear to protect.

Earth’s humanity, not one nation or ethnicity, is my only allegiance.

I will obey my duty, my order, and my oath to humanity.

My life selflessly belongs to Earth’s humanity.

Prologue: The Oath
Chapter Zero

Meet Edward Alfred, age fourteen, a squad leader of the James Lawrence Franklin Semi-Charter/Private High School Tiger Marching Band Trombone. He is an average fourteen year old sophomore. Oh, okay, slightly above average. Ed is smart, straight A student with perfect attendance, and able to take several honors courses with enough time to do both marching band and track. He is well known around his school, but not popular.

“Alright!” Drum Major Taylor Keble stands up and puts his cap over his long black hair covering one of his eyes and yells to the bus from the front, “We are playing for the first time this season. We will make our school proud! Let’s go Tigers! We are the best of the best in the area and the winner of several state awards and one national award. The Cobra doesn’t have anything on us!”

The bus load of bandies raises their instruments and cheers. Ed puts some grease on slide of his Yamaha trombone. He ties his shoelaces on his white leather marching boot and buttons up his blue and white jacket. Pushing his brown short and slightly spiky hair down under his hat and grabbing his music, Ed holds his trombone like a rifle. “I’m ready for action!” Ed yells with an adrenaline rush.

= Sept. 11, 2010. 1:13 am Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 10, 2010. 6:13 pm Central Standard Time =

Meet Edward Alfred, codename Guide Light. Rank: Sergeant Major. He is a member of Night Hawk, an elite stealth espionage squad that fights behind the front line of hostile worlds to defend Earth and her oblivious population from extraterrestrial threats. At the age of fourteen, his assignment age is low compared to the average starting age to the frontline infantry of sixteen. The average starting age for a covert agent is nineteen.

Isn’t he something special?
Don’t argue with me, of course he is!
“Alright!” Spearhead, the head of the unit, says under his black helmet with a spear engraving, “We are dropping in quietly into Tahton. We are to sneak inside the Rukantee warehouse complex and set up the objective. We all know our jobs, so let’s get this done with speed and precision!”

Waiting for the arrival at the drop zone, Ed puts a magazine of .45 caliber caseless bullets into his Tealsa-Rosa brand compact modular rifle and magnetically holsters his .50 caliber Tealsa-Rosa semi-automatic caseless pistol to his right hip. Of course being the strong silent type, he has suppressors equipped on his weapons too. He puts on his helmet with three four-point star engraved on it, and whispers with a calming tone “I’m ready for action.”

= Sept. 11, 1:13am Greenwich Mean Time =
= Date N/A, 27:63 mission local time (military time) =
Tahton, sixth planet of Isidor System, 187 light-years from Earth

Ed and the rest of the Tiger Marching Band stand up inside the Alexander Dennis school bus sharply colored with blue and yellow, the school’s color, unlike the ugly yellow buses from Bluebird that every other schools uses. Tony the bus driver opens the door and speaks through the radio, “Boys n’ girls we’re here. Have a nice time!”

“Game day is here!” Taylor, the drum major, cheers and jumps out of the bus as everyone else follows.

“Thank you very much Tony,” Amelia, the unofficial official photographer of the band, says as she looks into her camera’s view finder with bright blue eyes and takes a picture of him.

“No problem! Just take a lot of pictures,” Tony replies, “I’ll be here if any of y’all needs to come back for anything.”

The band marches into their opponent’s stadium, the King High School Cobra Athletic Stadium. The sections separate into their designated roll on the visiting team’s bleachers. They always wanted to march onto the bleachers, but physics says if they did that the bleachers could collapse. Ed leads his squad to their seats.
Ed attaches his flippy-folder to the top of his trombone and sits down. Ed, like all squad leaders, awaits the signal from the drum majors to start playing. He is jumpy with impatience. The other school hasn’t even played the Star Spangle Banner yet.

“Oh, I can’t wait this long,” Ed waves his flippy-folder in excitement.

I’m glad that he acts his age often and know how to have fun.

**Ed** and the rest of the Night Hawk stand in line in the forward airlock of the Brosnan Class Tactical Support Micro Cruiser, a black triangular shape spaceship, named Tomorrow Never Dies. Helmets are all set and their black sneaking suits are zipped up with thin armor plating and underarmor attached and ready. The entrance door to the airlock locks and seals as the bay depressurizes and the door hatch opens. Captain Zhang adjusts Tomorrow’s trajectory into orbit of Tahton and calls through the comlink, “We’ll be over the drop zone soon.”

The team looks down to the planet.

“Fifteen seconds.”

Ed fidgets with shoulder pads and chest plates for last minute check up.

“Ten seconds.”

A light on top of the airlock glows red.

“Five seconds.”

That light turns green.

“You have the go!”

“Yahoo!” Spearhead bellows as he jumps out first into the silent void of space and the rest of the team follows.

“I give my thanks to thou great much Captain Zhang,” Butterfly, the medic of the squad, being polite as always, says to the captain for flying them to their mission.

“You are always so polite Butterfly. No need to thank me, just doing my job,” Captain Zhang replies, “Okay I’ll come back when you set up the objective.”

The team dives from high-orbit around Tahton and enters the atmosphere. Ed’s helmet visor polarizes to protect his eyesight
from the flames of reentry, not even his brilliant green eyes can be seen though the black polarized visor.

They are entering from the day side of the planet to mask their entry trails, the Dusk Entry tactic. This way they will not be as noticeable as the shooting stars, which they would have looked like in the night sky. As the team approaches their target, they separate towards their designated locations.

In order to slow his descent, the air flaps on back of Ed’s suit open as a force field is generated around his suit which acts like a parachute. He gently glides to the roof of the Rukantee warehouse complex as if he had wings. Ed kneels down as he touches the ground and puts his right palm on the ground and his left arm up in the air to stabilize himself.

“Guide Light, landed,” he informs the team.

Ed is a professional. I’m glad that he knows when to be a professional and focus on the task at hand.

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Ed sits down after the national anthem.

“Remember, we have Iron Man and James Bond to play,” Taylor reminds everyone in the band with a megaphone.

“Yo! Can we get some Pixie?” Asks Gabriel Stevenson, a blond trumpet, who speaks with a fake ghetto accent.

“Yes, just make sure you are ready when you see my signal.”

“Alright!” Nina Tisdale, one of the flutes, yells.

“No-no!” Ed comments, “You will be so hyper from the Pixie Stix that you will speed up the tempo compared to everyone else.”

“A agreed,” Dan Hoken, an African-American drummer, yells back up towards the flute section. “No sugar for you tonight.”

“You guys are noooooo fun,” Nina sits down, crosses her arms and pouts.

TOUCHDOWN!!!! The Tigers score. The drum majors make ground pound gestures on their stands resembling the pose on the Iron Man movie poster, but weirdly this pose was never in the movie. Ed stands up and yells, “Iron Man!”

Ed’s trombone squad stops talking and puts down their Pixie Stix, stands up and brings their instruments to standby position.
The drum majors swing their arms in harmony and each section plays their part. Bobbing left and right, almost in sync, the band section on the bleacher shines in shimmering light as the stadium lights reflect off their shiny instruments.

This less-than-a-minute-long number ends and everyone sits back down as the football players on the field gets back to their position.

**Ed** sneaks into the warehouse via a maintenance shaft on the roof.

“Remember, we have to stay undetected until Nitro sets up the objective,” Spearhead reminds everyone via the comlink, “Commence Operation Extinguisher.”

“Do we have the Fifth Freedom?” Far Seer, the squad sniper asks from a valley a kilometer away. “I just want to make sure.”

“Sure you can use lethal forces. Whether they live or not, it won’t matter once our job is done. Just keep it silent until Nitro gets the objective set up.”

“YUS!!!” Queen of Hearts, the close quarter specialist, cheers.

“Oh no, no, no.” Ed concerns, “You cause too much of a mess. We kill silently, quickly, and painlessly, but you make your targets scream in agony.”

“Yeah,” Big M.A.C., the mid-range and electronic specialist, agrees with Ed, “No fancy moves tonight.”

“Oh, you guys are a buzz kill,” Queen of Hearts is disappointed.

“We are working, not playing,” Ed comments. “I am approaching my first objective.”

Ed slips under a corridor ceiling from a maintenance tube on the inside of the warehouse complex and lands on top of a strip of lights. He sneaks above the corridor to a side entrance of the center section of the warehouse. One lone Rakuntee soldier stands guard in front of that entrance.
The Rakuntee guard has the average height of six foot five, with dull blue skin, four eyes, a wide neck with two spinal cords, along with the customary two arms and legs. On their hands they have three fingers and two thumbs. The guard that is very attentive. All of its eyes are looking in all direction including up, but it hasn’t spotted Ed yet.

Everyone in the squad is in position for a simultaneous attack. “Go go go,” Spearhead orders over the comlink.

Ed swings down from directly above that Rakuntee guard while his legs are still holding him up to the light. He grabs the guard’s neck and places the underside of his wrists with a retractable neural stun blade in contact with the guard’s neck. The guard silently trembles as the energy from the blade scrambles the guard’s brain waves causing it to passes out. Ed holds on to the four hundred pound guard, with the help of his armor’s artificial muscles, and then slowly lowers the guard down to the floor so it does not make a sound as it collapse to the floor.

This less-than-a-minute-long coordinated attack is a ghostly success. The team disabled all the vital guards. Ed opens the door where the guard he took out was guarding and snaps into alert. In one, smooth motion he takes out his knife and pistol and aims up. A guard stands in front of him. Ed tilts his head and raises one of his eye brows. The guard’s head is drooping down with no supports from his neck. Ed puts his weapons away, “Stop playing around.”

The passed out body drops down to the ground revealing the giggling Butterfly. Some people are not that professional and do play around during mission. I guess being light hearted is a way to help release stress and keep their sanity, at least Butterfly isn’t morbid at all outside of missions unlike Queen of Hearts.

“That was great.” Amelia says to Ed while snapping pictures of the band.

“That was nothing, just you wait till half time,” Ed replies.

Amelia grabs a Pixie Stix and pours the sugar powder onto her tongue. “You want some?”
“Where did you get this? Only the band has the supply crate.”
“The flute section leader is throwing them out at people,” Amelia points up the bleachers towards the flute section.
“Okay, I’ll take the purple one,” Ed replies.
Amelia gives Ed an orange one.
“… Fine,” Ed rolls his eyes with a smile and takes the Stix. “So how many pictures have you taken of tonight so far?”
Amelia looks at her Cannon Rebel camera, “Two hundred photos since we left the school till now.”
“Wow that’s a lot. How many pictures have you taken since the start of this hobby of yours?”
“Uh…” Amelia thinks, “I think… Twenty thousands.”
“Damn, that’s a lot.”
“You think so?” Amelia asks doubtfully and starts to run off towards the end zone. “They’re about to have another touchdown, got to snap!”
With a few more exciting touchdowns, halftime nears and the drum majors are signaling everyone to move down from the bleachers. Everyone steps down orderly to the bottom of the bleachers and waits for the timer to reach zero.
“Hey Tigers, good luck!” Amelia cheers and runs off to the home bleachers. She carries a tripod and bag with a camcorder inside while her camera is bouncing off to the side.
The band forms up on the track which surrounds the football field and kneels to watch the countdown on the scoreboard. Five, four, three, two, one, BUZZZ. Both teams stop playing and run to the locker room. The Tigers are w00ting about their lead.
Taylor stands up, so does everyone in the band. He starts to high-step onto the field then turns around and marches backward. He yells, “Let’s go Tigers, ‘we only got Four Minutes to save the world!’ ”
The band follows him onto the field in synchronized rhythmic steps and begins to play.

“Good Butterfly, how was things on your part?” Ed replies to her.

“It was easy.” She said as they proceeded down the corridor.

“You know you don’t have to call me ‘senpai,’ we are the same age.”

Ed and Butterfly stealthily speed down towards their next objective.

“The term and the reason is not due to age, thou have more experience than I do on the field and a Corporal must display respect to a Sergeant Major.” They reach a door to the room which overlooks the main cargo hold and hide behind the adjacent wall. They put their fingers around that doorway. With cameras on the tips of their index fingers, they peek into the room.

“I see two of them guarding this… Eh, management office? I wish the map scanned from orbit would have labeled these small things.” Ed points Butterfly to the guard on the far side of the room.

“Agree, but how would they know what room is what?” Butterfly pulls out two diamond edged butterfly knives and swings them open and plays with them by flinging them around then catches the knives by their blades.

“Go.” Ed, slightly crouches down, stealthily runs towards the guard near the door. At the same time, Butterfly throws her two knives at the guard. Never liking to use lethal forces, Ed stuns the first guard with his neural stun blades while Butterfly’s knives hits the afar guard’s two parallel spinal cores, killing it instantly.

Ed and Butterfly enter the main cargo hold. The rest of the team waits for the two by the stockpile of missiles. Ed looks in awe at the hundreds of faster-than-light interstellar ballistic missiles.

“We might want to hurry,” Far Seer informs the team via comlink, “I am hearing an alerted squad is approaching your location. They must be investigating the missing guards.”

“Copy that,” Spearhead looks at Nitro, “Set up us the bomb.”

“Yes sir,” Nitro, the explosive expert, attentively sets up an Alchemic Reaction Bomb. “How long should I set the timer?”

“Four minutes.”
“Isn’t it a bit too short?” Big M.A.C. asks.
“No, we can’t risk the guards finding it. Four minutes is how long Tomorrow has to come into beaming range, let’s go.”
The team slips back into the shadows and vacates the area.

The Tiger band marches to the tune of Madonna’s *Four Minutes*.
The drum majors shake their hips, bob their heads, and lip-sync to the music. The cheer leaders dance in the middle of the field with the trumpets forming a circle around them. The trombones run towards the front and drop and side roll while playing their part.
The parents and fans on visiting bleachers cheer for their team.
Amelia stands on top of the home bleachers as she records the performance. She manages to move the video camera on her tripod with her mouth and uses her hands to takes pictures with her Cannon DSRL camera by manually focusing the lenses. That is some talent! Amelia’s eyes twinkle with every click of the shutter.
Ed is fills with joy with every note he produces. With each step he takes, the stadium lights flicker off his instrument.

“Shit!” Far Seer yells over the comlink. “A few guards discovered a body. They are going on high alert and heading your way. The building is being surrounded as we speak.”
“We got no choice but to fight,” Spearhead says disappointingly.
“I’ll cover you guys from up here,” Far Seer prepares herself to snipe from a valley about a kilometer away.
With two minutes left on the timer, the team exits the building. Rakuntee guards are outside with their weapons ready.
Streams of smoke trail appear and a few Rakuntee guards’ head disappear into a cloud of blue and gray mist. “No need to thank me.” Far Seer snickers over the comlink and continues to reload her .55 caliber rail sniper rifle.
A few more Rakuntee guards storms towards them along with a tank. Seriously? Using a tank against six people? Well, I guess our organization do have reputations that require a tank. Ha! Like a little tank is going stop my pride and joy.

Big M.A.C. takes out a few diamond tipped steel needles and a steel coin. He charges up his electricity and BOOM!! A rush of electromagnetic energy serges through his body and accelerate those needles out of the clutch of his fists as if his hands are a cloud of a thunderstorm. The needles and that coin are accelerated to six times the speed of sound towards the enemies. One of the needles pierces though several guards. The coin treats the tank’s armor like an aluminum can and breaks into its engine, causing it to explode. Big M.A.C. truly lives up to his codename: Magnetic Acceleration Cannon.

Captain Zhang is flying Tomorrow in zigzags as he enters the atmosphere, “Guys, the Rakuntee deployed some fighters. I’ll be running a bit tight. And the Rukantee has activated counter measure to teleport, but if I fly close enough, it should still work. I’ll fly in close as possible to beam you guys out. Just hang in there.”

One minute left.

Queen of Hearts takes out the remaining guards with her deck of diamond edge playing cards. She… Well, I’ll spare the gruesome details. Let’s just say, in fewer than ten second time, she can cause damages to living things that would make the torture scenes from the Saw movies looks like scenes from Cat in the Hat. And she does it with glee and a smile on her face. Not a maniacal smile, but a cheerful, playful smile… like a child.

The song is over and the band poses for the big finish.

Nina and her fellow flutes spin away from the center and point their flutes up towards the field goals. Gabriel and his fellow trumpets do a quick summersault and form to almost Charlie’s Angels poses. Dan and the drums stand sideways and pump their fists up. The cheer leaders forms pyramids behind the drums. Ed and his trombonists stand at attention in between in the drums and
salute. Taylor and the other drum majors run up and lay sideway in front of the band. Hearts are beating. Sweat drops running. Adrenalin pumping. The first half is over.

The team runs as far away from the warehouse as possible while battling the guards. The bomb detonates from the warehouse. Energy explodes from the bomb that causes chemical reactions with any compound around it to lose its chemical bond and releases its stored energy into a very powerful and large explosion.

The flame of the explosion engulfs the team and their enemies as they run away from it. Captain Zhang flies down with Tomorrow over the sea of flame. The team covers them self as the intensive heat from the explosion scorches their armor. Target locked, teleportation field activated. Swirling green sparkles glow around the team members and they fade away.

Chapter Zero: Double Lives
Chapter One

This is the story about Edward Alfred. He is very important to me and he will become something great. Without him, humanity will suffer. I certainly hope to be wrong about the future if what I expect of Ed is wrong. I don’t know the future. I am just very good at chaotic mathematical calculation to predict the future. I am not God, far from it. I am but a humble servant of humanity, one of your many Guardians, and so is Ed.

“I gotta buy you a drink. One more second, we would have been fried,” Ed says to Captain Zhang while, along with the rest of Night Hawk and their support team, getting ready to leave the bright metallic briefing room.

“Sure! I like German beer,” Captain Zhang, the young square face Chinese, replies, “I thought you guys can do that Armor Lock thing that let you survive even a nuke.”

“We do, but we didn’t get the order to use it.”

That’s one reason but the Armor Lock system has to be activated manually, unless they have adjutant AIs, which none of them have. It also takes at least thirty minutes to deactivate it. Plus, they can’t move while under lockdown. That’s extremely uncomfortable.

“I would have used it if I were you. Anyway, I’ll be going. See you next mission.” Captain Zhang takes his leave. Of course he would take the flight rather than the fight approach when it comes to these kinds of situation. He is only a pilot, but not just any pilot. This charismatic fellow is one of the few elite pilots of the Eyes of Shadow, or simply known as the Intelligence Department. My pilots here can sail undetected in a cluster of sensor arrays and drop out of warp with only a meter between them and the enemy without the enemy knowing what hit them.

You must be wondering who are we or what organization are we?
Don’t lie, you were wondering what is Ed working for that can have him at a high school football game and out in some alien military base on some planet far, far away at the same time.

We are Curator de Terrae, Latin for The Guardian of Earth, or commonly known simply as the Guardians. Those who work for Us are called Employees. We are the protectors of everything you know and love and even hate. No need to thank us. We don’t expect thanks since you don’t know we exist anyway. We safeguard the planet in secrecy to protect humanity until it is ready to exit childhood and enter the greater interstellar community. No government organization knows we exist, only a few has some sort of speculation but no one has any proof or knows the extents of our operation. Only a small number of Civilians know of our existence and we only have very limited diplomatic relations with a few certain people in certain religions and cults.

The Eyes of Shadow… You know what? I’ll just stick with calling it the Intelligence Department since every Employee refers to it like that. But don’t you think the official name so much more romantic and mysterious, because I do. Anyway, most Employees working under this department are just analysts. Ed and the Night Hawks, however, are the few of my special ones who actually works in the field. There are the Night Hawks, the Night Owls, the Eagles of Dawn, the Vultures of Noon, and a few more… all named after a bird and a time of day.

After the debriefing, the team gathers for a quick chat and prepares to leave for home.

Nitro is the first to leave.

“Heading off Caracara?” Ed asks.

He nods. “I can still catch the last quarter of my school’s football game if I’m quick.”

“Lucky to be from a later time zone! My game is already over and I really wanted to do the half time show in person.”

“Yeah. What can we do? We swore the Oath. At least we can relive it.” Nitro runs off but stops to wish him a wonderful birthday.

“Thanks.”
On that note, Nitro runs off. His real name is Caracara Woodsfield with the rank of Sergeant Major. He is an eighteen-year-old half Indigenous American with brown eyes, dark skin tone, and black short hair. He is a bit of a videogame nerd. Caracara is a kind of person who people enjoy being with for a short period of time but gets annoying after a while, especially with his sarcasm.

After Caracara leaves, Butterfly puts away the knives she had been cleaning and walks over to Ed. Still in her hand is a can of Evidence Away spray, a product of Nothing-Happened Industry, a preferred brand of many people working for the Intelligence department who wants to get rid of any evidence like blood stains.

Butterfly’s real name is Kokoro Fukuda, a fourteen-year-old Corporal from Japan with dark dark brown, shoulder-length hair which she usually ties in a pony tail. She is the youngest and the newest member of the team. While speaking to people of higher rankings, she tries to talk with honorific when speaking other languages in attempts to imitate Japanese. In the case of English, Kokoro’s struggle makes whatever comes out of her mouth sound like broken imitation Shakespearian English. She is kind to everyone and tries to keep anything negative to herself, from personal feelings to opinions toward others.

“Happy Birthday, Alfred-senpai,” Kokoro sweetly says.
‘Senpai’ is a way to address someone with a higher ranking in school or at the same job.
“Thank you,” Ed replies.
“I have thy gift in our dorm. I must give it when we travel back.”

Kokoro puts her knife cleaner in her suitcase and just as she does Spearhead takes his leave. Everyone gives him a quick salute.

Spearhead nods as he walks by everyone. He walks naturally with a prosthetic for his left leg below the knee. If he had lost his leg during work, we would have grown a clone leg and attach it back good as it was, but Spearhead lost his leg before we recruited him. Wouldn’t you think it would be suspicious for someone to randomly has his lost leg back good as new back on Earth?
Rashid Zahir is his real name, a twenty-eight-year-old from Afghanistan with the rank of Colonel. He always has tired eyes and a rugged beard.

Before he reaches the door, Rashid stops. “Hey, Ed, your birthday is tomorrow. Doing anything special?”

“Yeah,” Ed replies and explains how he is going to see his first R-rated movie in theater with his friend.

“R-rated?”

“R for Restricted. American rating system prohibits people younger than seventeen to enter a movie without an accompanying adult for that rating.”

“But aren’t you turning fifteen?”

“Yes, but I have a friend who knows someone.”

“Good to have connections. I don’t know when you’ll be back before the next work shift, so I’ll give you your present now.” Rashid throws a small box at Ed.

“Thanks!” Ed catches and opens the box, Glittery eyes “Oh wow! A five hundred Union gift certificate to Café Künzler!” Ed exclaims.

Café Künzler is a very old and famous restaurant, old enough for the age to be classified, which is anything older than fifty years. It is famous for pastry and cakes. Every Executor, the highest ranking Guardian officer or Guardian’s Commander in Chief, has their first lunch after inauguration there and they all had cakes.

Kokoro drools as she looms over Ed’s shoulder to take a peek at the gift certificate.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” As you can tell, Ed loves the gift of cake. “You shouldn’t have! Wait a minute, how did you get this? Künzler doesn’t sell gift certificate. And how’d you afford this?”

“When you visit, I recommend getting their coffee as well. Not only do they have the best pastry in the city, but they also have the best coffee too!” Rashid is keeping quiet about his income. His salary as a commissioned officer and a field operative is quite high but he also has a high paying job at an espionage university. It also doesn’t hurt that he knows the current owner of the café.
“I’ll go tomorrow.” Ed stares at the certificate with glittery stars in his eyes. “Thanks again.”

“I’ll see you next shift. I’ve got to file these reports,” Rashid heads off to the department’s office complex.

All of a sudden, Big M.A.C. takes off his shirt revealing his bulky muscular body. From his suit case, he takes out a bright orange Hawaiian shirt, part of his usual collection, and puts it on. He is prepared to leave for another planet. Erasto Hassan Omar is his real name and captain is his rank. He is the second in command of the team. If the team is ever split into two groups, he would command one of the groups while Rashid would command the other. He is a cheerful twenty-one-year-old from Somalia.

“Where art thou departing for, Omar-senpai?” Kokoro asks.
“I am going off to see my sweetheart,” Erasto answers.
“Isn’t it unusual?” Kokoro asks.
“No, it is like a normal relationship.”
“I didn’t mean to be offending, I’m just wondering if it’s difficult to travel a hundred and twenty light years to see whom thou heart belongs to. Personally, I don’t think I can handle a long distance relationship like that.”

“We have our ups and down because of it.” Erasto expresses, “Having only seventy-two off-planet, non-duty traveling hours per month doesn’t help either, but we are willing to work for it. When you are in love, you are willing to do everything to be with each other.”

That’s sweet and all, but romantic relations of any kind are not really smiled upon, especially with someone from off world because of security risk. He should file the paperwork for a romantic relationship before the Personnel Department decides to interfere.

“That is sweet,” Ed sighs with a hint of envy. “I wish I could find a girl I would care this much for.”

“You are still young. Don’t worry about it now. You’re lucky you have an education to focus on. Just enjoy life and, of course, have a great birthday.”

“Tha…” Before he can finish saying ‘thank you,’ Ed is interrupted by a woman’s scream.
“My face!” That is Queen of Heart. “You didn’t have to kick me!”

“You didn’t have to flip my skirt up.” Far Seer says.

“You wearing a skirt demand my attention!”

“I don’t want to get involve with this. I have a boat to catch,” Erasto takes his suit case and walks away.

The beauty in a long black uniform skirt in front of everyone with a cane in one hand is Far Seer and her real name is Faustine Richard, a gentle and caring nineteen-year-old First Lieutenant from France. She has dull yet brilliant hazel eyes and dark slightly curly blond hair. She could very well be a model if she wants to be. She has been told by modeling agencies back on Earth that she is perfect, but she hates the idea of being ideal.

Queen of Heart’s real name is Leilah Rodrigues with the rank of Sergeant Major. She is also a nineteen-year-old, but from Brazil. Her dirty blond hair, which matches her caramel skin tone, is long and silky. She had certain events in her life that made her into a very unique person compared to most other Employees.

“Wearing something that plain? What’s the point?” Leilah asks.

“Why should I care? I can’t see it and it’s under everything I’m wearing.” Faustine says.

Ed face palms at their usual antics. Leilah enjoys sexual harassing Faustine after almost every other mission. Strangely the two are best friends and roommates too.

With that said, Leilah silently jumps towards Faustine with her hands out prepare for some fondling.

Naturally, and usually, Faustine side steps.

“How the hell can you know I’m coming at you?” Leilah screams.

“I heard air movement around you.” Faustine says. “You should know how my hearing work by now!”

“Actually, I don’t care how your hearing works. You are just so sexy,” Leilah explains while gazing lustfully at Faustine’s slender body with her hands in squeezing motion ready for some groping. “Let me cop a feel of those juicy C cups of yours.”
“You’re unbelievable,” Faustine yells. “We have a teenage boy with raging hormone here and he haven’t even stared at me once since joining the team and we’ve changed together in the armory plenty of time too. All the men on the team have seen me naked almost on a weekly base and many other people have seen me naked too. You have no excuse.”

“How can you tell he or anybody hasn’t stared at you once?” Leilah scratches her head and asks.

“I can hear what direction he is looking at.”

“Hey Ed, do you think Faustine is hot?” Ed has this why-are-you-dragging-me-into-this face. He answers with a bit of awkwardness, “She is visually appealing.”

“Thanks for not using the B word,” Faustine sweetly says. The B word is beautiful. She hates being called beautiful.

“Here!” Leilah says as she tries to lift up Faustine shirt but Faustine quickly takes an en-garde position with her cane.

“Okay... Here,” Leilah lift up her shirt and bra and shows everything to Ed. “Anything?”

Ed has no reaction.

“Really? Nothing?”

“I have yet to meet a person up here beside you who would react to, well, these.” Ed points at her and says.

“Alfred-senpai and I take a bath together after every mission and he has never gazed upon me the same way as how you wish for him to gaze upon you.” Kokoro adds in.

“What is the big deal?” Ed asks.

“Ugh, the big deal is her damn sexiness. You’re not tempted at all?” Leilah gives Ed an eye roll. “If I were you, I would have taken advantage of this lovely body already,” Leilah says while drooling over Faustine.

Ed shakes his head and puts in palm over his face in embarrassment. Ed is not alone in being not tempted by Faustine’s Victoria’s Secret model body. The other guys on the team as well as almost all Employees don’t look at Faustine with anything similar to Leilah’s drooling gaze. We don’t hire people who may become shallow people and we make sure people see people as people, no matter how they are dressed or how they behave.
Treating people like people base on how they behave is the difficult part.

Leilah inches forward towards Faustine.

Faustine pushes a button on her cane’s handle to electrify the cane. “I’ll beat you!” Faustine threatens.

“I’d like that.” Leilah steps back a little and smiles.

“I’ll stab you.” Faustine reaches for her saber.

“I’d like that too. You know I’m too kinky for torture.”

“Fine, psychological warfare it is! I’ll break into your room and bleach clean that blood-soaked teddy bear of yours.” The teddy bear from the scene of her first murder she had kept as a memento. She went through a lot of trouble requesting to get that up from Earth. Policies state movement of objects from Earth to space and vice versa is prohibited.

“Not Mister Bubble! You wouldn’t!”

“Try me! I’ll also delete that gruesome simulation programs too.”

“No!!” Leilah retreats back to the other side of the room with gloom over her head.

Faustine puts her cane back down to the ground. “It’s weird how she is the only perverted Employee.”

“That is an understatement,” Ed adds. “It is rare, but I am sure there are others.”

Leilah yells from a corner in the room, “Don’t forget I am a serial killer!” Yeah, this is one of the characteristics which make her unique compared to most other Employees. Lack of concerns about feelings of other, check. Disregard of social norms, check. She’s also easily aggravated. But to be precise, she was a serial killer up until we recruited her. One of the youngest serial killers we’ve recruited. She was active from age eight to twelve with twenty eight victims under her belt, all of them were in some illegal industry. I guess that’s the beauty of being a child and a serial killer is no one ever suspects a thing.

No matter how she behaves now, I am glad she is the way she is now. She might not care for people but she is happy. Before we recruited her on her twelfth birthday, she only focused on revenge. She witnessed the brutal murder of her entire family. She is finally
moving on, but you can’t fix a sociopath this deep in blood, you just have to feed her more.

If she continued with killing those deserving bustards back on Earth, we would have made her beg for death during her punishment for homicide. In crime and punishment with the Guardians, death is a merciful thing to be sentenced for homicide but we are merciful against those who don’t show humanity to others. She now has aliens and humans from other planets to kill, but only when the mission permits it, and that keeps her happy most of the time.

Faustine rolls her eyes at Leilah’s comment, “I don’t understand these appearance things at all. I’ve never seen my body before.”

“Maybe that’s why you don’t understand. It’s probably a good thing,” Ed comments. “You don’t judge people on how they look. You probably have the highest virtues among the team.”

“But I judge people by their voice. I don’t know how different it is, but I feel like I am still judging people by a superficial factor.”

“You can tell a lot about someone from their voice.”

“I still feel bad for judging people. I feel like I am a bad person.”

“You are still human after all. We’re a very judgmental species.”

Very true, I have yet to observe a human being from any planet that isn’t judgmental.

“Happy birthday old man!” Faustine giggles as she feels around her suitcase.

“Old man?”

“You are surprisingly wise for your age.” She takes her empty hand out of her suitcase, “Oh, I forgot to bring your birthday present.”

“That’s okay, you didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I’ll get it to you next time.”

“Thanks.” Ed replies and pulls his suitcase up from his desk. He looks at Kokoro, “Ready to go?”

Kokoro closes her suitcase. “Yup.”
Ed wishes a good day to Faustine and Leilah. Ed and Kokoro walk out from briefing room hearing Faustine yelling at Leilah. “Hurry up! I’ll leave without you.”
“How are they best friends?” Kokoro asks.
“No idea, I guess they have chemistry,” Ed says.

You might be wondering where on Earth do we hide Our planetary protecting operation from everyone on Earth. The answer is simple, all of Our operation are done in space. We have no facility on Earth.

Our headquarters is the giant ship Gladius et Clypeus, meaning The Sword and Shield. The size of the massive ship is a little smaller than the state of Connecticut. It is usually hidden in orbit behind the moon or perfectly phased cloaked in Earth’s high orbit so no Civilians can detect us. Inside this Grand Ship is the magnificent Global City, or simply put, The City. This City is slightly larger than the size of New York City’s greater metropolitan area with 4.5 million inhabitants. 97.12% of the inhabitants are between the ages of ten and thirty and only a very small fraction of the inhabitants are not Employees. However, because of work schedules and their civilian lives, only about a third of them occupy the city at any given moment.

Since the entire Intelligence Department is located outside of the City on the underside of the ship, Ed and Kokoro have to take an elevator up then transfer to a train to enter the city. They switch to the city train system and sit down in the front of the train. The clean white automatic train travels quietly from the platform into a tunnel with lights passing on the wall to the side.

As the train nears the tunnel’s end, twilight from the exit shines into the train while entering the city on a bridge. The night sky following the Greenwich Time is displayed in the artificial sky as tall as the width of the city. Two massive transparent hulls made of Pentmond, a substance that is four times stronger than diamond, are on two opposite sides of the city. Those hulls have fake coloring to create the illusion of a sky from the emptiness of space outside, creating familiarity of Earth.

“Oh, sad day,” Kokoro complains.
“Why is that?” Ed asks.

“We missed the real sun.” Disappointment

“Yeah, too bad we can only see the real sun in the morning and late afternoon.” The ship makes one complete rotation every day so the real sun can shine through at dawn and dusk.

The train passes through district after district, peaceful suburban towns and beautiful green countryside to vibrant town centers and elegant skyscrapers reflect the fake sky.

Ed takes out his silver colored digital notebook from his briefcase and jots some highlight of the mission for the formal report he will have to write.

“District Epsilon,” The train announces.

Ed and Kokoro leave the train. Ed continues to write until they reach street level.

About a block away from the train station, a blonde woman with dark red eyes is walking by slowly. The young woman is dressed in a white long-sleeved blouse, a pre-twentieth-century style skirt with a corset on the outside, and is carrying a white parasol that is black on the inside.

Ed and Kokoro walk pass her.

NOM!

The woman has her mouth on Ed’s neck after a silent sneak up.

“Old Hag….” Ed stops.

“WHAT!?” Kokoro looks behind her towards Ed and jumps at the sight.

“Oxidised blood. Your fragrance after heavy physical activities is fantastically appetizing,” the woman in white says with a British accent while still gnawing on Ed’s neck. Drool

“Wilberforce-sama, what are thou doing to him?” Kokoro aggressively asks.

Ophelia lets go of Ed and slowly licks her own lips. “Oxidised blood mixed with adrenaline has the taste of heaven and even by its lonesome, your blood tastes fabulous. These two factors in combination make your blood at this moment in time fantastically delicious, if I am granted a small drink of course.”
Ed wipes the drool off of his neck with his sleeve.
“I let you drink that one time to save your life, now you want to eat me. Great, just great!” Ed pouts.
“I desire not to eat you, only a mere tea cup worth would suffice,” She cutely said.
“I know synthesized stuff does not taste very good, but I am not going to give you any of my blood.”

Ophelia’s diet normally includes synthesized blood, the same kind that battlefield surgeons use. It’s white and that’s just unsettling for her. It has ten times amount of oxygen per volume and that affects the taste but it gets the job done. Well, if she is feeling special, she can always buy some cloned blood, but those are also not as good as the genuine article.

“As if your mortal experience is able to grant you any comprehension of my preference of food? Synthed food shares not any similarity with synthed blood.”

“Still…” Ed says slowly. “If you are dying, I would gladly give some blood to you. Just… now…”

Ophelia smiles and wraps her arms around Ed over his shoulders. “Silly Edward. You must make haste to learn of ways to comprehend my humours and sarcasm.”

Ed smiles, “Well, you are just failing at trying to be funny and I can’t tell you’re being sarcastic.”

“Am I showing my age?” Ophelia joyfully says to herself in almost a soliloquy way. “My greatest prayers to the Lord! I deduce the feeling in my heart at this moment mustn’t be any different from the feeling of an aged man attempting to converse with the youth.” She snaps back into the moment, “Yet Edward, by chance if you encounter situation involving lost of blood, please, I implore you to preserve even the smallest of drop for my savoring.”

“Look,” Ed says as Ophelia releases him, “I’ll tell them to get a small bag of blood for you next time I donate blood or get shot or cut.”

“That is adequate,” Ophelia takes out an antique pocket watch. “I must depart. I am meeting a bishop at the Vatican in a quarter hour.”

“See you later Old Hag,” Ed jokes.
“Goodbye,” Ophelia looks at Kokoro and continues walking, “You grew since our last encounter. You look incredible.”
“Thank you,” Kokoro waves a goodbye.
Ed and Kokoro keep walking.
“That was interesting,” Kokoro looks back.
“Her trying to bite me?” Ed asks.
“No. When she looked at me, she looked envious.”
“She is. She wants to grow old. Immortality is a depressing thing.”
“Hmmm,” Kokoro pause. “Thou and she really know each other well.”
“Yeah. Ophelia was a teacher during my first year at Basic Training. She taught basic engineering before she restarted her career as a diplomat.”
“And the thing about drinking thy blood?”
“Did you read the mission report on Operation Counter Bullet from a few months back?”
“Yes, I remember. It didn’t go well.” Kokoro says as they continue to their dorm.

Ophelia Wilberforce is a vampire over 500 years old, that’s twice as old as the United States, but physically still nineteen years old. She has been working with us for over 191. Since she doesn’t physically age past thirty, we can’t ever force her to retire. Ophelia had nine complete careers with us, each starting from basic training to high ranking general. She even was an Executer once. Currently, she is a Major in the Olive Branch, also known as the Department of Diplomatic, Resource, Personnel Management. Within that, Ophelia works with both the Office of Extraterrestrial Relation as a diplomat and the Office of Terrestrial Relation in dealing with vampires here on Earth.
How did Ed save Ophelia’s life?
That’s a story for another time.
I apologize for all the blacked out text, Guardian policy requires anything over fifty years of history has their date classified. Its a little security policy to insure Earth’s culture won’t be contaminated by Guardians culture. We can’t afford to let
anyone, even Employees, to know how old We, the Guardians, are. It will have a heavy impact on their world view and that will affect how they look at the world and even behave back on Earth.

After a few more blocks, they run into another person.
“Ed, Eyulf took your shift at the community farm right?” A tall man with a military haircut in uniform accompany by a little redhead girl asks.
“I don’t know anything about it, Major Conrad,” Ed replies at attention.
“Well, just remind him not to bring machineries again. He should know that mechanical farming is prohibited.” Even with all the technologies at Our disposal, many simple tasks prohibits helps from machineries, a way to foster responsibility and self-reliance. Food growing is one of these tasks. We do let horses and cows to help plow the field but everything else is done by hand. Farming is one of many mandatory community service activities Employees can choose to do.
“Yes sir, I will relay the message.”
“Good,” Major Conrad continues on his way.
“That guy creeps me out,” Ed says quietly.
Kokoro says nothing, probably trying not to be judgmental about someone else’s judgmentalness.

Ed and Kokoro arrive at their dorm building, the Northern Epsilon Pavilion Dormitory. The twenty-story building with white glassed-panel walls has a central partially-enclosed garden with blooming flowers and the entrance is in the middle of it. It has a nice view. They can see the mountains a few districts away and a glimpse of coastline as well. They take the elevator from the lobby up to the eighteenth floor and exit to the terrace hallway. One side is a wall of dorm doors, the other a view of the garden. The door unlocks as Ed touches the door handle.
Ed and Kokoro walks into their four bedrooms, two baths, two toilets, one kitchen, one dinning, one living room dormitory. This place really shouldn’t be called a dorm. Wouldn’t you like to live an apartment condo this big?
The first thing that greets Ed and Kokoro is a bunch of tools and mechanical components neatly lined up from the entryway to the living room. Ed sighs a little at the mess. At the end of the line, there is a note from Eyulf Skeie, one of their roommates. The neatly written note says “happy birthday” and that he has taken Ed’s shift at the community garden this week.

“So this is what Major Conrad was talking about…” Ed says.

“Oh that reminds me,” Kokoro prances into her room and return with a box wrapped up and tied with a bow. “Happy Birthday Edward-senpai!”

“Thank you.” Ed unties the bow, shreds the wrapping, and opens the box. Inside are two matching tie pins with a design of a butterfly and four-point stars on it, a hybrid of their personal insignias. “These are beautiful.”

“One is for I, one is for thy,” Kokoro replies.

“Uh?”

Kokoro sighs and speaks in normal English, “We are family now!” She takes one of the pins. “This is our crest. I am now your little sister.”

“You are stupid.” Ed hugs Kokoro. “Just like a little sibling. So sis, since we are siblings now, can you stop talking to me in honorific?”

Kokoro laughs, “This is the only way I’m willing to drop the formality, oniisama.”

“That means big brother, but isn’t ‘sama’ even more formal than ‘senpai’?”

“I am not trying to talk to you in honorific now, am I?”

“Alright little sis.” Ed is probably glad that she is not trying to force forms of another language into English anymore.

Kokoro says as she goes towards the bath, “Are you going to join me?”

Ed follows as usual and asks as he takes off his clothes, “Why do you like taking baths with people anyway?”

“It is boring by myself. I am an only child, I have no siblings to bathe with and I am getting too old to bathe with my father. My mother is works evening at the hospital. Just so boring by myself,” Kokoro’s voice echoes inside the bathroom. She takes a seat on a
plastic stool and turns on the faucet with a washbowl catching the water.

Ed follows suit. “Boredom is essential. Without boredom, there wouldn’t be any fun.”

“Face your back towards me,” Kokoro requests as they pour water over themselves.

Ed does what she says and she starts to rub his sweaty head with shampoo and then his back with a soapy towel.

“How does that English saying go? ‘Scrub your back and scrub my back’?” Kokoro asks and rubs Ed’s back.

“It goes ‘I scratch your back, you scratch mine,’” Ed turns around and returns the favor.

“There is one awesome thing I want to show you.”

“What’s that?”

Kokoro looks back at Ed with a smile and nudges to signal Ed to move his hands away from her. Suddenly she glows a little, literally, and fades away. The water that was on her body is either falling down to the tiled floor or vaporized.

“Uh?”

Before Ed has a chance to look around, both of Ed’s arms are grabbed. His arms get twisted and his entire body is being lifted and gets flipped over into the bathtub of warm water.

Ed surface from under the water and looks around, “I must have hit my head, I am seeing two of you.”

“You are seeing two,” two Kokoro laugh.

“What?”

“The Gemini Effect,” one Kokoro says and the other one continues, “Heard of it?”

“Yes, but I…” Ed replies, but the two Kokoro put their hands over their heads in pain, “are you alright?”

The two Kokoro fade away with a glow. One Kokoro reappears in between where the two was at. She slowly falls down.

Ed rushes to catch her and worriedly asks, “Are you alright?”

“Just low on Psych Energy,” Kokoro weakly replies, “Help me into the tub?”

Ed helps carry her into the tub, “Are you really okay? Do you need to go see a doctor?”
“No, I just need a few seconds,” They face each other as the two soak in the bathtub.

Ed and Kokoro are Psychies. They have scientifically proven abilities to manipulate things using their mind. Using Psych Abilities is taxing for all Psychies, but people with different skills and proficiency react differently.

Kokoro’s Gemini Effect can be a very powerful ability if mastered correctly. She, however, is just a novice, a level one. This ability temporarily merges small parts of two very similar alternate universes, more like timelines, into one. This allows for two of the same person or object to exist together in the same space for the same moment in time. Basically she can create a double for a very short amount of time and retains the memory of both of her selves.

Ed spots a pair of foot print, the size of Kokoro’s feet, burnt into the floor tiles.

“What’s with the foot print?” He asks.
Kokoro laughs nervously, “I can’t really control it.”
“Well, I’m glad you pushed my hands away.”

That also explain why she almost fainted. Kokoro only discovered this ability a few weeks ago. Her inexperience causes severe temporal disturbance on a molecular level if not smaller and drains a lot of energy from her mind. If she didn’t do this in the shower, whatever she would be wearing would have the chemical bond holding the fabrics together and catch on fire. These kind of temporal induced damages on people are externally difficult to treat.

After fifteen minutes of soaking and chatting in the bathtub, Ed stands up and grabs a towel.

“How are your other abilities coming along?” Ed asks as he dries himself.

“Slowly, nothing to get excited about.” Kokoro says as she jumps up from the bathtub.

Kokoro has other abilities, one of which is bending lights. If she works hard at her training, she’ll be able to turn invisible but right now, she can only bend infrared light, practically useless in most missions. Most high-tech aliens, like the Rukantee they fought earlier, can detect any infrared bending abilities.
“You’ll be happy for me,” Kokoro says as she takes a seat in front of one of the sinks in the hallway of sinks in front of the baths. “It has been three months since I had an episode.”

“That’s nice.”

“Well, I have my lucky charm.” She plays with her hair a little. “Do my hair?”

“So, what’s your lucky charm?” Ed takes up a hair brush.

“You… I haven’t suffered an episode since I moved in here with you.”

Ed blushes a little.

She has one other ability, but it is a traumatizing one. It causes psychological episode with traumatizing visions and sensations. I rather not talk about it now. It’ll ruin the happy mood.

Kokoro gives Ed a blow dryer, “Also, my Passive Ability is getting better. If it improves more, I don’t think I’d need to go to cram school anymore.”

“I am jealous. My Passive Ability sucks. Not getting noticed by anyone is really great for high school,” Ed sarcastically says as he fixes Kokoro’s dark brown shoulder length hair.

Poor Ed, he has the Unnoticed Passive Ability. Passive Abilities cannot be consciously controlled. Most Unnoticed Ability is based around emotion. If he is in a good mood, people will tend to notice him more, but on the flip side, if he is sad or depress, people will tend to not notice him at all.

On the other hand, Kokoro has a Passive Ability that allows her brain to speed up depending on her mood. A happy day of school for her means more time to learn and soak in the information. On a good day, her brain can work four times faster than the average person. Anyone in school would want that type of ability, specially while taking an exam.

Kokoro laughs, “How are your other abilities coming along?”

“Alchemy in physical change is coming along. My chemistry class at school is helping me with this. I can also move gaseous substance up to fifty meters away.”

“That might be useful.”
“Also, I can now change the vectors of kinetic energy up to six hundred joules if I really concentrate with my Kinetic Vector Manipulation.”

“Cool, you can deflect .45 caliber magnum bullets!”

“Only a certain kind. I am taking a class on it and the training in it is really tedious.”

“I heard stories about it. Don’t get shot!” Kokoro says with concern.

That’s the final exam for his training, deflecting a live .55 caliber sniper bullet traveling at the speed of sound. If he gets shot he fails. Oh relax, we grow a clone limb of the limb he’ll get targeted at before the test just in case.

“Keep it up! I know you will pass that class.” Kokoro encourages.

“Thanks…” Ed finishes up Kokoro’s hair.

There is a category system we use to designate every single human being on earth. We use estimation from this system as a factor to determine who to hire. This categorization is base on what of the four types of abilities people have. The types are alchemic, based on changing atomic and molecular structure. Then there is energy, based upon manipulation of energy, from kinetic to electric. Next is natural, where a person can control life force. This is great for healing to controlling plants and animals. Lastly is temporal, the type that can control time and space. This last type of abilities is heavily regulated since it might be a great hazard if someone can travel back in time.

Both Ed and Kokoro are categorized as Category C. There is S, for people who are master at all four kinds of Psych abilities. A is for people who can use all four, B is for three, and so on. Most human on Earth as well as practically every human on any other planet is Category E. E is the normal people where they don’t have the genes to use any Abilities. You are a Category E.

Don’t argue with me.
You are an E.
Nothing special.
Insignificant just like anyone else.
Don’t give me that look.
“I call next!” A girl peeks into the hallway of sinks.

“Hey Siddhangana! Can you take a rain check?” Ed asks. “I’m very tired.”

“I just passed my mechanized unit piloting exam. I want nice hair for my license photo.”

“Congratulations!” Kokoro yells.

“Congrats! Mark the calendar in the living room. I will be happy to do your hair,” Ed says while finishing up Kokoro’s hair by putting in a red and blue butterfly hairclip.

Siddhangana Jaiteley is another roommate with Ed and Kokoro. She is a fifteen-year-old from India with short black hair and dark skin. She is a very polite pilot in the Military Department’s Mechanical Corp. Not only is she a good pilot, she is also an excellent engineer. If she’s not wearing an oil-stained jumpsuit, she’d usually be wearing a traditional Indian sari over a frilly skirt and a tank top. Because of their work schedule, Siddhangana hardly ever see Ed and Kokoro.

Kokoro stands up and puts on her underwear. She is staying up on the ship to practice her Abilities while Ed heads for home.

Ed says, while walking to his room. “I wonder what I had missed in life during the mission.”

“Were you not telling me how epic your musical performance will be?” Kokoro asks while heading to her room.

“I hope I didn’t mess up. Our performance is supposed to be intense.”

“Tell me all about it. Good night oniisama!”

“I will. Good morning Kokoro.”

“And happy birthday!!”

Ed lies on his bed and probably is thinking about how this new found siblinghood is the only way Kokoro would speak to him normally. He puts on a Memory Synchronizer around his head like a halo. He prepares to synchronize his memory of his Civilian life which he had missed during missions.

We have a system called the Perfect Holographic Substitutes (P.H.S.). People usually call it the hollow-me. It is a system that
replaces Employees in their civilian life so there is no worry of them going missing from Earth and having Civilians wondering where they are. The hollow-me is indistinguishable from a real person. These hollow-me can eat, smell, and do everything normal people can, including having illnesses and body heat. Every single cell is holographically recreated. They even make decisions and think like the real person 99.237% of the time. So, no matter what, no Employee will miss out in their live because of their obligations and no Civilian will start questioning about Us.

>>Loading memory from Perfect Holographic Substitute……
>>Connecting to neural interchange……
>>Rendering memory……
>>Synchronization initiating……

While synchronizing, the body will also be put into the status of the hollow-me, so the Employees would feel tired or awake or anything in between from whatever had happened in their Civilian live. In mere minutes, hours of life are relived. With the P.H.S. system and memory synching, every Employee is living a perfect double life.

In Ed’s mind, he is brought back to a few hours ago and his memory forms around him like sand castles made of white sparkling glass dusts collapsing, but in reverse. He experiences the events of before the game and the halftime show till the very moment he will beam back down to Earth.

The halftime show was spectacular. Ed walked back up to the bandstand to put his instrument down for a break. The bands from both sides gathered at the concession stand for food and snacks while the football players started the third quarter. There was no music in the stadium but the fans were plenty loud.

Ed spotted Amelia taking some pictures. She took notice of him from the corner of her eyes and walked towards Ed with her pony tail slowly bouncing to the rhythm of her footsteps.
“Absolutely amazing!” She said while looking slightly up at Ed. She is half a head shorter than Ed. Amelia swiped her long brown hair from her eyes and snapped a picture of him. “I was expecting someone to mess up! How did you guys do the summersaults?”

“You got to thank Mr. Sokolov.” Ed referred to their band director.

“What’re you talking about? You’re the one who actually taught us how to do it.” The tall Drum Major, Taylor, came and put his right arm over Ed’s shoulder while drinking a can of Coke. “When the Crazy Russian suggested what to do, we all laughed. Then Ed stood up with his instrument and marched towards the center of the band room. Before he reached the middle, he leaped forward then did a summersault.”

Oh yeah, the band director used to be a Soviet soldier, hence the nickname.

“Impressive,” Amelia complemented with a mix of sincerity and sarcasm.

Ed cracked a smile with embarrassment.

“Yeah, the Crazy Russian then said ‘Everyvody follow him. I vant to see everyone dooing this at least a fourth as vell as vhat the Soviet army would have wanted!’” Taylor horribly imitated the heavy set director with a thick Russian accent.

“So,” Amelia went into paparazzi mode and started snapping pictures of Ed from different angles without letting the camera shutter or the flash have any rest, “Edward, you are the star of this band.”

Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!

Ed waves his hand in front of him to avoid the nonstop flashes of light.

“We had help from the cheerleaders.” Being humble as usual, Ed quickly gave the credits to someone else. “They are willing to spend the time to give us advice and let us use their equipments.”
“I see, so I can’t give you all the credit. I’ll have her share in all the glory as well.”

A blond girl approached with pep and hype. “I can’t believe we pulled it off!”

Amelia began taking picture of this cheerleader with the same paparazzi energy as she did for Ed.

Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!
Snap and flash!

“Amelia! What the hell are you doing?!” The blond cheerleader waved her arm frantically but not practical for blocking the stampede of flash photography.

“I am just giving credits to where it’s due, Ashley,” Amelia lifted her finger from the shutter button.

“We were just talking about how it would not have been possible without you and the cheerleaders’ help,” Ed thanked them.

“Ha ha ha!” Ashley laughed while playing with her hair, “It was all thanks to me”

“Please don’t stretch it that far. We all know it’s a team effort.” Amelia stared at Ashley with a little friendly discontent.

“Then why did you blind me with all those flashes?”

“And me?” Ed added in.

“It’s fun,” Amelia blinded Ashley with her camera flashes while she was making funny faces.

Ashley Markus is a peppy cheerleader and a concert band member, quite popular in the school. She is the same age as Ed and went to the same elementary school since fourth grade but the two met on a local playground long before then. The two even went the same junior high school with each other. They have had at least two classes with each other every semester since then. They are the best of friends, yet never claimed to be. The two often go to each other’s home without invitation. They are very close to each other and Ashley is very protective of Ed, almost like an older sister.
Amelia Crusher is well known around school but she is not popular. Those who don’t know her refer to her as the Camera Girl or the student council secretary. She is never seen without her cameras and a few novels. Amelia started her photography hobby around ten years old. Interestingly, no photos or videos of her exist after that time. She had never shown up to any school picture day. She even manages to avoid the school’s surveillance cameras as well as those in stores. She has lots of friends and knows a lot about many people but not too many people know much about her. She has a cell phone but no one has her number. No one even knows where she lives except for the school’s record book. She is a mystery.

Ed bought an inexcusably expensive hot dog from the money grubbing concession stand. He took a bite from it and a hard, loud smack was bestowed on his back.

Ed choked and coughed. “What the hell Nina?”
Amelia quickly took a snap of him.
Ed knew this attack was coming and could have dodged it too, but he was lost in thought.

“Nina!” Ashley yelled. She patted Ed on the back. “Are you okay?”

“You know, I sure hope for your sake that Sokolov won’t try to top this show for a while.” Nina takes off her cap and shakes her head to loosen her bob cut brunette hair.

“Why’s that?”

“We aren’t the KGB.” She twiddled her thumbs while trying to hold onto her cap. “It is a miracle that we pulled this one off.”

“We had the time of band camp to practice.”

“That is true, but we won’t have the time if he thinks of something else. And if you show off again and let him think we can pull off whatever crazy stunt, I’ll beat you!” Nina threatened with an adorably angry face beneath her glasses.

“Oh, okay, I won’t.”

“If you try,” Ashley clung onto Ed and proudly said, “you’ll have to get through me first.”
“I’d just have to go find myself a pirate then, miss ninja” Nina joked while twiddling her thumbs.

Nina Tisdale is one of the hardest working students in this school. She comes from a poor family and was very close to getting the full scholarship on the entry exam, but lucky enough to have been picked in the entry lottery. Because of this, she forces herself to study, even though she constantly drifts into daydreaming about zombies and the ghostly paranormal. She is an enthusiast, if not a fan girl. She also works a lot. Aside from obsessing over zombies, she spends a lot of time thinking about business and working. She buys everything with money she made herself so she knows full well the value of a dollar and how to stretch it as far as possible.

A few minutes had passed and a girl with black salon-maintained hair, similar to those scene girls’ hair but more tamed, dressed in black crept up behind Ed prepared to scare him with her hands out like a velociraptor.

Ed turned around. “Hey Lisa.” Blushed

Of course she failed.

“Honey, how’d you know I was coming?” Lisa asked looking at Ed with her hazel eyes.

“That’s what she said!” Ashley yelled and laughed!

“Really, Ashley? Really?” Lisa scowled.

“I heard you,” Ed replied to Lisa’s question.

“With all these noises sweetheart?” Lisa doubted with the loud background noise of the crowd as evidence.

“Well, he is a ninja,” Amelia joked.

Ed laughed in the back of his mind.

“You are not, I am,” Ashley pointed at herself.

“You don’t look like the type. Too loud,” Amelia gave her blunt rebuttal.

“I am half Japanese,” she kept pointing at herself with her thumbs.

“How politically correct of you,” Amelia sarcastically commented.

37
“I also have a blue belt in karate, I am learning kendo, and I own a few swords and throwing stars,” Ashley boasted. “Plus, all my cheerleading training made me really acrobatic and flexible.”

“Oh! You are learning kendo, Japanese fencing!? Where are you learning it from?” Nina asked excitedly. “I always wanted to learn use some sort of sword!”

“You know that place by that strip mall……” Nina and Ashley drifted away into their own little world.

“So hon’, excited for the movie tomorrow?” Lisa asked about their plans for Ed’s birthday.

“What are we watching anyway?” Ed asked. His heart was beating faster.

“Afterlife.”

“You know, I don’t have high hope for any movie based on video games.”

“This is the first Resident Evil movie in 3D and it came out today. You had to be excited somehow.”

“I am not zombie obsessed, like you.”

“You got her confused with Nina,” Amelia said.

“Oh, I did. You are the Tward!”

“What’s a Tward honey?” Lisa asked.

“It is a short for Twihard,” Ed explained.

“My goodness, I am offended!” Lisa, the Twilight fan, put her hands on her waist and gave him a jokingly angry look. Ed laughed a little.

Lisa gave Ed a small giggle.

“It’s strange seeing you here,” Amelia said to Lisa. “I thought you said you hate these sporting events.”

“Oh hon, I sneaked in just for the show,” Lisa replied while pretending to be sneaky by hiding behind a randomly placed cardboard box near them. “And you guys were fantastic!”

“Thank you!” Ed replied. Blushed

Sounds of a distant whistle coming from Taylor alerted Ed.

“Sorry, we’ll talk later,” Ed pointed up and twirled his arm and yelled. “Let’s move it! Fourth quarter is about to begin!”

“I’ll see you later, hon!” Lisa yelled.
Ed waved back in acknowledgement as he walked away.

Lisa Fillion is a kind hearted girl who is also a bit gothy. She comes from an average white-collar upper-middle class family. Her warm personality and southern-ish manners doesn’t fit her interest at all. She loves anything vampire and is a very big fan of anything Twilight related. She always dresses in black, she even successfully petitioned the student council to approve an almost all black variation of the school’s uniform. Her style is cute, not spiky.

The band made more music as the game went into a dramatic overtime with a tie. In the end, James Lawrence Frankling High School won the game by scoring a touchdown with six seconds to spare. Don’t you expect them to have only one second to spare, this isn’t a movie. The band played to the school fight song and marched its way back to the bus.

“How’d we do?” Tony the bus driver asked.

“Wo0t wo0t! Wo0t wo0t!” The band chanted in unison as a positive reply while they boarded the bus.

“Al’right! We won!” Tony the bus driver joined in the celebration with his hands waving while resting his feet comfortably on the dashboard.

Ed sat down and spaced out to think while on their way back to the Frankling High School.

“ ‘Do you want to do something Sunday?’ No, too casual. ‘I like you, we should go out sometime.’ Too blunt….”

Amelia grabbed the seat next to Ed, “I should notify the school’s counselor.”

“Uh? What are you talking about?” Ed snapped out of his thoughts.

“Talking to yourself is a sign of being crazy.”

“What? I’m not talking to myself!”

“You were mumbling,” Amelia poked at his personal bubble.

“Nothing, just thinking about stuff.”

Amelia suspiciously gazed at Ed.

“Don’t be so nosy.”

Amelia kept air poking him.
“Quit it,” Ed yelled as quietly as possible so he would not attract the attention of others on the bus.

She smiled and put away her cameras. She looked towards the front of the bus and the exhausted Amelia slowly rocked to sleep to the rhythm of the moving bus with her eyes half closed.

Nothing much happened after the game. The buses didn’t get back until eleven thirty. Ed changed and chit-chated a little before biking home.

>>Memory Synchronization complete.
>>Transferring direct control of the P.H.S. to its user…
>>Synchronizing current body status…
>>Body Status Synchronization complete.
>>Teleportation field engaging…
>>Phasing out P.H.S. solid integrity…
>>Shutting down P.H.S. and Orbital Holographic Emitters…
>>Civilian Live Commute Insertion complete.

Ed wakes up in his bed back home on Earth. It is now past one in the morning in the average suburban house. He sneaks down stairs without any effort to get a drink of water and comes back up to check on his sisters.

The first room facing the staircase on the second floor is Ed’s youngest sister’s room. Ed looks in the open door into the all pink and pastel colored room with Disney princesses stuff everywhere. There is a castle about as tall as his knee made from LEGO in the corner of her room along with a small village being built. In the center of the room, he finds his youngest sister has wiggled out of her blanket on her bed.

“Eli, Eli, Eli,” Ed quietly says to himself and enters the room. He traverses towards her bed while avoiding the sea of LEGO pieces on the floor. “Doing kung fu in your sleep suit Ellen more.”

Ed tucks Eli back into her blanket, even with her wearing a tutu.
Elizabeth Alfred is the youngest in the family. Everyone in the family calls her Eli. She is a very girly girl, she loves anything related to princesses, her favorite color is pink, and she loves to have tea party with real tea. She is naturally curious to new things, always asking why and how. Like the rest of the family, Elizabeth is very smart. She even was offered to skip third grade but she already is the youngest in her class and her mother wanted to be a normal as possible for elementary, so she didn’t skip a grade.
Ed jumps into ninja mode. His breathing quickens. He is a little tense after each mission but he is very adaptive, more than the average in his field.

Nothing.
Ed is not sensing anything out of the ordinary either.
He eases himself.
“What’s going on?” Ed asks his second youngest sister at her room door, where the sound originated from.
“Sorry…” Ellen says. “I was so close to winning against a Korean in *StarCraft*… Unexpected nukes destroyed all my bases…” She mopes in front of her laptop screen.

She is hunched over at her desk with a laptop out. She’s wearing an oversized t-shirt and a pair of men’s boxer short. There are a few empty soft drink bottles on her desk. Her room is a mess. There are clothes and school related stuff everywhere, there is even a compound bow on the floor.

“Just be quite and don’t stay up so late.”
“Yeah, yeah, yeah, it’s Friday night,” Ellen waves Ed off.
Ed goes to Ellen’s desk, picks up a half empty two litter bottle of Mountain Dew, and walks back out.

“Hey, I was drinking that!” Ellen sneers.
“Drink some water, too much of these are bad for your bone density.”

Ellen Alfred is Ed’s second youngest sibling, the middle child. She acts pretty much like a boy. She hates dresses, easily throws punches at things, very strong physically, and she even walks is in a masculine way. Much to her dismay, however, she is well endowed physically. The only personality trait she has that isn’t very boyish is her nosiness and curiosity in other people’s businesses. Currently in eighth grade, Ellen is as smart as Ed. She has a very deductive and logical brain. However, her smartness, along with her short temper and a childish sense of justice are reasons of her being a trouble maker.
Ed goes back to his room with a smile on his face for being home with his family. He jumps into his bed and digs himself into his blanket.

He wears a smile on his face for being back home with his family as he drift off into sleep.

Chapter One: Two Homes
Chapter Two

The next day is Ed’s birthday.
He wakes up a little after nine to work on some homework. Ed’s mom is taking Eli to ballet and Ellen to archery lesson so Ed is home alone working.

A few hours later, an old rusty blue Honda Odyssey pulls up in front of Ed’s house. There is even one bullet hole in the front right door.

Ed comes out the door.
The van’s right door slides open. A guy raps out, “Oh hot damn, get in Dan’s van! We are gonna party till the AM.”

That is Gabriel Stevenson. He is a wannabe gangster. Some even call him a wigger. He comes from an average middle class family and pretends to be all gangsta, thinking he is cool and can get girls this way. However, he underestimated the standards of the girls in this school. Also, treating them like the dancers from rap videos doesn’t help him either. His behavior also lands him in detention fairly often, but he can’t even get the girls who are into the bad boys.

“Not till the AM,” Ed says, “I’m having dinner with the family.”

“Just get in,” Gabe says.
“Happy birthday!” The driver says

The driver is Dan Hoken, a classy African American gentleman. He is a junior, a year older than Ed and his crowd. Coming from a family living off food stamps, he still manages to dress like he comes from an upper class family. He is a charming person, a bit too much at a time. Dan tries not to use his charms to his advantage, but he still does it for good reason sometime. Many girls have a crush on him, but he hasn’t gone out with anyone before in fear of jealous rage. His popularity with the girls pisses Gabriel off sometime.
Ashley, Ed’s unofficial best friend, Nina the zombie obsessed, Lisa the friendly goth girl, and Amelia the camera girl are also in the van.

“Hurry up you!” Nina, who is wearing a Resident Evil Umbrella t-shirt, yells from the backseat. “I don’t want to be late for this disappointment!”

“Alright, Alright,” Ed replies as he is getting on to the van.
Everyone tell him happy birthday.
Ed curiously asks, “Eh, disappointment?”

“Of course. These movies have nothing to do with the complex story, thrills, and ideals of the games,” Nina speaks like any true Resident Evil fan would but with a critical tone of a politician to add to the touch. “They are just a love letter to Milla Jovavich from the director.”

“If you hate the movies, why are you coming with us?” Ed asks.

“For fun and spending time with you guys.” Nina plays with her necklace with a red and white top down shape of an umbrella the insignia of Umbrella Corporation, the fictional antagonist group of the Resident Evil franchise.

Dan smiles at the comment, starts his car, and drives off.

After fifteen minutes on the road, they arrive at the town theater on the other side of town. It is a newer theater but it has a classic sixties style façade look to it with the giant vertical sign sticking out its front door.

“I was under the impression that we are seeing this movie in 3D,” Ed comments.
And this theater is somewhat new, but not new enough for 3D.

“Do you want to pay James Cameron pricing? I know you can’t afford it. Most of us probably can’t afford it either,” Nina comments.

Ed shakes his head probably thinking how expensive they are.

“Yeah dawg, we ain’t made of greens.” Gabriel opens the side door and get out of the car. Ironically, he always flaunts his money among the group.
Everyone walks to the theater’s ticket booth and gets hit in the face with the smell of butter before they enter the actual building. Butter drenched in popcorn. The place isn’t very clean either. There are stains of soft drinks on the carpet.

Dan goes ahead to buy the tickets. Forty-nine dollars is the total for Resident Evil: Afterlife. Dan looks back towards the group, “Seven dollars each, but not from the birthday boy.”

All but Ed pay Dan back for the tickets.

“I love how cheap this theater is,” Nina comments.

Before they can go inside the theater, a Tesla Roadster silently drives up to them. This is an all electric custom sport car.

“Hey guys!” A blond girl says from the passenger seat.

“Sophie, I was wondering where you were,” Amelia says.

“I’m totally paying for the movie,” this Sophie girl says as she gets out of her car in all designer clothing, Coach purse, and a skirt that is so short that she might as well not wear it at all. She waves back to the car and the woman in the driver seat drives the car away.

Everyone walks into the theater

Life is pretty good for Ed right now. Ed is with all his friends and he is celebrating his birthday.

But of course, life isn’t perfect.

Ed’s phone vibrates and he takes it out of his pocket and wonders what is going on now.

“You guys go ahead,” Ed says, “I need to get this.”

Ed finds a corner to stand at and hit ‘respond’ on his phone.

He puts his phone up to his ear and a message starts to play that only he can hear, “Emergency mission. All team members must report to the office of General Hayley Carroll inside the Sword and Shield Complex in half an hour.”


He walks to bathroom, checks that it’s empty, and enters a stall. With a wisp of light, Ed beams up to work leaving behind his hollow-self to enjoy his birthday.
Ed enters the screening room greeted by a sticky floor making every step a noticeable peeling-tape-off-a-wall sound. Ed grabs a seat between Lisa and Amelia. Ashley and Sophie are sitting behind him.

“You know Ed,” Sophie whispers into Ed’s ear, “If I am, like, sitting next to you I can totally give you a…” blargh!!!

I just had to censor that from your eyes, way too inappropriate. Sorry for the inelegance of the random sound. I can’t black out non-work related information.

And of course Ed is utterly confused.

Ashley quickly jumps forward and hugs Ed from behind, holding him like a child, “Stop trying to spoil Ed you succubus!”

“Mmm…” Sophie backs off and wonders. “Succubus, I totally like the power associated with the title, but it makes me a bit evil compared to just being called a slut.”

Ashley sits back down with a jail warden gaze aimed at Sophie. An ad for the upcoming Halo: Reach game comes on, the slow motion live action running one.

“Hell’s yeah!!” Gabriel yells. “I can’t wait!”

People in the theater are staring.

“Is that a girl Spartan?” Lisa asks.

“Yeah, ya gotta problem with dat?”

“Nothing hon’, just didn’t know they make them.”

“Halo is a good story, ain’t expectin’ yo never played da game to know,” Gabe says with his arms flailing around, all gansta’ like, in front of him.

“Don’t get all defensive about it honey. I was just curious.”

“Just don’t be disrespectin’ this game.”

Lisa rolls her eyes and turns her attention to Ed.

“Do you play many games?” She asks Ed.

“Nope, not really,” Ed replies. “Most games are too violent for my taste.”

“Really?” Lisa sounds surprised. “Hon, I expected you to play Call of Duty or something like that.”

“I hate war games.”

“There are other kinds of games.”
“Well, I used to play SimCity before high school started. I got a wonderful region built up too. But now, I just don’t have much interest or time anymore.”

“Not even one that you still play?”

“Well…” Ed thinks, “I do play Minecraft once in a while.”

“Uhmm,” Lisa thinks, “I’ve never heard of it honey, but I don’t know much about games.”

“It’s a little known indie game. I heard one person made that game and it took him years… It is not even complete yet.”

“SHUT UP!!” Nina yells as the theater’s lighting dims and the previews come on.

Ed puts his arms up and lowers his head saying a silent apology and everyone pulls out their phones to put them on silent.

= Sept. 11, 2010. 04:14 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 11, 2010. 11:14 am Central Standard Time =

Up in orbit, Rashid is walking with Hayley up to her office to prepare for the mission.

“If you don’t mind the intrusion madam,” Rashid says, “but can I ask you a personal question?”

“From you? Of course I don’t mind.”

“Shouldn’t you be home today? It is an important day.” Rashid conqueringly asks.

“The memorials were in the morning. I didn’t attend, if you’re wondering.” I hate memorials

“My team just finished a mission less than fifteen hours ago. Please tell me this isn’t a distraction from today.”

“The situation came up in my briefing last night and I wanted to use your team. If you weren’t on a mission this morning, I would have your team on the field right now.” Hayley looks up at Rashid with a few strands of her naturally silky white hair caught in front of her stern look, “I’m not petty Rashid. I know how to separate work from life.”

“Yes madam, I just want to make sure you’re not using my team for personal reasons and that you are alright.”

48
“I’m fine. You don’t need to worry about me. I’m not your subordinate.”

“Then Hayley, can I worry about you as a friend then?” Rashid says with a smile.

“If I don’t have to give this mission, I’d still be up here. I can’t stand it down there today. Every year is like this.”

“Your fellow orphans? Shouldn’t you be back with them?”

“I’ll relive what my hallow-me is doing but I need something else. They can take care of them self. I’m not strong like them.” Hayley says with a sigh.

“What are you talking about? You leads soldiers onto battlefields. You are the bravest person I know.”

“Every Employee is two different people. I might be strong in my work life, but I am weak back home. Can you keep a secret Rashid?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t be working in the Intelligence Department if I can’t.”

“For nine years, on this day, I cannot function normally back home. I lock myself in my room and cry. Do you know how hard is it to live with yourself knowing the last words you said to your parents were ‘I hate you. I wish you didn’t exist,’ in a tantrum and two hours later, they died?” Hayley starts to cough. She covers up her mouth with a handkerchief.

There is blood on the handkerchief.
“Are you alright?” Rashid asks.

Hayley nods. “If you tell anybody what I said to you, I will… I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“Slow down. Just relax. I’m not going to tell. You shouldn’t stress yourself with your mesothelioma.”

“I might be dying from that, but this job is keeping me alive.”

Hayley stops talking to give herself a rest.

We have excellent health plans. Any injuries or illness caused by work can be treated but not anything pre-existing. If an Employee has a terminal illness, we only keep them alive until they retired. Who knows, if someone is about to died when we recruited them at ten, a cure may be devised back on Earth when we force them to retire at thirty.
Oh, if you are wondering, we force everyone to retire at thirty because people get more stubborn as they age. This leads to attachment to nostalgia that hampers innovation and evolution.

Lieutenant General Hayley Carroll is an incredible young woman from New York City. She is only sixteen years old and she is the commander of an army of fifty thousand. She is nothing really special, just a chess prodigy, not even a Psychie, no special abilities at all, but the frontal lobe of her brain is more active than her peers. Hayley was recruited at the standard age of ten. We offered to adopt her, but she refused because we would have taken her into The City where she would have a minimal Civilian life back on the Earth. She said she have to take care of her orphaned family.
Shrapnel Flying! Flames. Exploding. Debris. Limbs. Blood. As the action continues in the movie, Ed is getting more and more uneasy. Drops of cold sweat slowly roll down his forehead. His hands are grabbing into the armrest. Ed doesn’t like action movies. There is too much violence that he faces on constant basis, not to mention he can perform some of the stunts in the movie and knows people who can do the rest, including the outrageous fighting moves of Albert Wesker, the main antagonist in the movie.

Let’s not even mention slasher movies to Ed. He cringes on hearing the movie titles and is even scared of the box cover on the DVDs. However, Ed can handle regular horror movies to a certain extent that are more psychological and supernatural rather than violent, basically situations that he wouldn’t normally encounter.

Amelia looks over to Ed and her enjoyment from the movie fades a little as she notices his queasy, pale look.

Ed and Kokoro, both in their black uniforms, met up and ride the train towards the center of the ship. General Hayley Carroll’s office is in the Military Complex in the upper central part of the ship, just a bit below the command decks. They switch to turbo elevator going up two hundred stories to the office.

They enter the main lobby of the Military Complex decks. The lobby is a grand hall of calming blue with a ten story high vaulted ceilings leading up to a sky light which is a transparent part of the fifty meter thick pentmond hull. The hull is five times harder than diamond. Along the two walls parallel to the lobby, are open hallways. Leading to the main reception area, are twenty trees representing each of the twenty armies. There are also several fountains and various other shrubberies.

“I can’t wait to meet the legendary Checkmate!” Kokoro says.
“Don’t set your expectation too high,” Ed warns. “Sometime, the legend is way over blown from reality.”

Hayley is a legend. She finished military university at fourteen and became an adjutant to a general. During a routine military operation, the platoon she was with was ambushed and the commanding general of that army was heavily injured. She took command of the platoon of three hundred humans and five hundred androids. A few hours later, she over took the ambusher’s army of forty thousands and crushed their main base. By the end of the two day operation, she had zero human fatality and only two-hundred and thirty androids completely destroyed. Because of her victory and her armor was decorated with chess symbols, Hayley earned the nickname of Checkmate.

Ed and Kokoro approach the large circular reception desk at the end of the lobby, when one of twenty receptionists in green uniform greets both Ed and Kokoro.

“Welcome to The Sword and Shield Complex, how may I direct you?” he asks.

“We are here for an emergency briefing with General Carroll,” Kokoro says.

“Please wait just a few seconds,” the receptionist taps on a holographic keyboard and the security cameras identify them. “Please wait in the waiting area for an escort.”

“Thank you Warrant Officer,” Ed nods his head.

Ed and Kokoro walk down a wide curved staircase behind the reception area and into a sitting area. Before they have a chance to sit down, the escort pops out from practically nowhere. They are that efficient!

“Sergeant Alfred and Corporal Fukuda, follow me, and I’ll take you to General Carroll’s office.”

“I give thy my thanks, madam,” Kokoro says.

“I’m Lieutenant Thuy Trang Hoang, General Carroll’s assistant.” she greets.

Lieutenant Hoang is a twenty-five-year-old from Vietnam.

“I am surprised that an adjutant would bring us up,” Ed says.

“I was walking back from the cafeteria anyway.”
Oh, so much for my efficiency remark.

Lieutenant Hoang holds an elevator and let Ed and Kokoro in first.

They exit after a quite a few floors and walk through another reception desk into an office complex. Lieutenant Hoang opens the door to Hayley’s office suite. Inside is an office with a desk and a door leading to the General’s actual office.

“You are relieved,” Lieutenant Hoang says to a person sitting in her desk.

“Yes madam,” the Lieutenant’s personal AI goes into static fritz and fades into nothing.

 Lieutenant Hoang sits down and presses a button on a console on her desk. “Madam, two of the Night Hawks are here.”

“Let them in,” Hayley says over the intercom.

Ed and Kokoro enter the office. It is a large office with a nice view of the frontal part of the ship’s exterior. Hayley has a big hand carved wood desk with assortment of decorations. There is a large holographic strategy table and an absurdly large chessboard with a game in progress that has about fifty white pieces and six times the amount of black pieces.

Rashid the team leader, Erasto the walking talking electromagnet, and Caracara the explosive expert are already here.

“Sergeant Major Edward Alfred reporting as ordered,” Ed salutes.

“Corporal Kokoro Fukuda reporting as summoned,” Kokoro salutes.

“At ease,” Hayley holds down a giggle at how Kokoro reported in, “I am General Hayley Carroll, nice to meet you two. Just make yourselves at home till everyone gets here.”

“Nice to see you kids,” Rashid says.

Ed nods.

Kokoro explores Hayley’s office. She attempts to touch the giant chessboard. “Uh?” Kokoro mumbles to herself when her hand is stopped by a wall of fluttering light.

“The force field to prevent anyone from cheating when the game is not in session,” Hayley says as she stands up from behind her desk and walks over.
“There are seven kings…."
“Yeah, I am playing against seven generals at the same time. Seven versus one is quite a challenge.”
“If you are what they say you are, madam, this is only fair,” Erasto compliments.
“Thank you, but chess and a real battle field are nothing alike. There are no set movements for each unit on the battle field.”
“Don’t be modest. You are the best strategist of this generation.”
“Thank you,” Hayley still blushes after more than a year with her reputation.
“Where are Leilah and Faustine?” Caracara asks.
“They are going to come in at the very last minute as usual,” Ed says with a slight obnoxiousness.
Hayley presses a button on her headset, “Nope, they are not. Let them in.”
“First Lieutenant Faustine Richard reporting as ordered,” Faustine, the team’s sniper, walks in and retracts her white guide cane, holsters it, and then salutes towards whoever in the room that she guesses is Hayley. She is facing the right person.
“Sergeant Major Leilah Rodrigus reporting as ordered,” The brutally joyful psychopath, Leilah salutes.
“At ease,” Hayley says and presses her headset again, “Hoang, please tell General Lee everyone is here.”
“I am surprised you two didn’t arrive later,” Rashid says.
“I threaten Leilah with the teddy bear routine again,” Faustine smiles.
“I am getting a force field for my room door,” Leilah says annoyingly.
“I’ll just get in some other way.”
Leilah pokes at Faustine’s right ear and says with a bitchy tone, “I’ll hide a noise canceller in the room. You’ll be blinded when you get in.”
“I still have my hands to feel around.”
Leilah mumbles under her breath.
The door opens. Everyone but Hayley stand at attention and salute.
“At ease,” The man says.
“Nice to see you General Lee,” Hayley greets.

Major General Hyun Ki Lee is one of the commanding generals of the Intelligence Department. This man is in charge of Night Hawk as well as other stealth units. He is a short twenty-four year old with a military haircut from North Korea.

“Nice to see you too.” General Lee replies and turns his attention to the team, “Night Hawk, someone is finally filling in the spot left empty by Major Möller’s retirement.” He says to towards the door, “You can come in now.”

A young girl, little bit shorter than four feet, walks in. She salutes, “Sergeant First Class Michelina Lombardi reporting.”

She has ambitious sparkling blue eyes and chin-length brown hairs.

“This is an outrage,” Ed calmly shouts at General Lee, “Sir.”

“I think I know what you are going to say, but say it anyway.” General Lee says as Michelina still stands at attention without any emotionless.

“How old is she?”

“I am eight, sir,” Michelina says.

“Don’t you see the problem?” Ed asks.

“I know she is young,” General Lee replies, “I don’t like this any more than you do. Her assignment is from all three command branches. The vote in the Counsels narrowly went through and the Executor vetoed it a few times, but the Judgment pushed it through, especially the Wisdom of Elders and Knowledge of Analyzers. It is out of my hands.”

The governing system We uses is similar to the United States’ government with three branches. The Counsels is the legislative branch, the Executor is the highest ranking position We have, and Judgment is the judiciary branch. The Elders are retirees older than thirty years old that we deemed to be wise and the Analyzers are unemotional unbiased smart artificial intelligences. They are like the Supreme Court.

“So what? This is wrong.” Ed rages and turns to Rashid and points at Michelina, “Did you know about this ahead of time?”
“Do you think I want another kid to go through the same hell I went through when I was growing up? I filed four times as many petitions to deny her assignment than you two,” Rashid points to Ed and Kokoro. “My hands are tied,” he replies with regret and slight disgust.

“I do not have any field experience, but I have completed all training simulation with more than one-hundred percentage rating and other randomly generated simulations with greater than ninety-seven percent rating. I am a capable soldier,” Michelina says with confidence showing in her bright blue eyes.

“The battlefield changes every second,” Kokoro says. “Simulation and reality are very different things.”

“I agree, but given enough information, I can predict the near future without the need of any Psych Abilities. I can adapt to any situation instantly by doing chaos theory calculation in my head.”

“Skills aside,” Faustine joins in, “Wouldn’t the Battlefield Age Limit Act of Classified Year prohibit her from joining us?”

“The act states no one with less than four years of employment can be deployed onto the battlefield regardless of standard deployment age,” Michelina explains.

“And when where you recruited?” Ed asks.

“2002,” Michelina explains, “I am an Adoptee.”

“That should be irrelevant,” Ed says, “I’ve met other Adoptee before, even those adopted at birth. None of them got deployed before fifteen.”

“I am also a Category B with the potential to become a Category S. I am a master at all of my Abilities. I am an asset to any mission.”

“I don’t care if you are a Category O. It’s wrong for someone your age to be deployed behind enemy lines, or on any line,” Ed’s eyes are full of worries, not anger.

Michelina fires back, “You and I both know the Omnipotent Category is just a myth. And why is the taboo of my deployment relevant? Is it still wrong if I am a teenager instead? Is it wrong to have a person with Post Traumatic Ancestral Memory Stress Disorder to face danger? Is it wrong for a blind woman to be a sniper? Is it wrong to have a romantic relationship with someone
off planet who may become a liability or security hazard? Is it wrong to let a homicidal sociopath be used as a weapon and indulge in blood lust rather than giving her treatment? I have read all of your files I legally can. Yes, all of your deployments are taboo based on your Civilian societal normalcy.”

Ed and the rest stand in silence.

“Enough,” Hayley says with a finality tone. “I need the Night Hawks’ expertise in this mission. I could spend time on the paperwork requisitioning for the Kappa Sigma sorority or let the mission take twice as long to be completed with the Night Owls unit. Just take your time arguing. The safety of Earth is nothing compared to your little conflict of morality.”

Cold cold sarcasm.

General Lee waits by Hayley. The team gathers around the large holographic table with a star map projected up from it.

“This is the Leronno region, two hundred eighty-eight light-years away from Earth.” Hayley pokes the map and swipes her arms towards each other on the map and the map zooms out with her motion. “This is Préhension in the Saronite region, thirty-three light-years away from the edge of Leronno. This planet is our largest stronghold other than this ship.”

She zooms in on the map. “Préhension is threatened by a newly discovered Rukantee operation on fifth planet of the CXT-12834 system. I don’t need to remind anyone if Préhension falls, Earth falls. An unmanned surveillance probe suggests that is their staging point. There are no inhabitants for several light-years and the planet is also uncharted. But rumors suggest that it is rich in resources. It is highly like that the Rukantee are getting ready for an attack on Préhension and are probably taking advantage of the resources to aid their endeavor.

“Therefore it would be highly advantageous for us if we could prevent this attack and better yet, capture this planet from the Rukantee. This is where you guys come in. I need the Night Hawk to scout out their HQ on this planet to do a threat assessment and sabotage key points if I deem it necessary. If they pose any immediate threat, then my army and I can go in and take care of the rest.”
General Lee continues after Hayley, “Because this is a recon mission and General Carroll wants a surprise attack, this mission is to be a no-kill mission with minimum engagement if possible. You are to be unseen, unheard, and more undetectable than the sprites themselves. We don’t have enough intel on the place. You will have to adjust your objectives accordingly when you reach scanning range and on the ground. Understood?”

“Yes sir,” everyone says.

Caracara raises his hand, “Sir, our boat can handle that kind of range but it would take days for us to get there. How urgent is this mission and how long will it last?”

“Ideally,” Hayley answers, “no more than twelve hours on the ground. I will take you to Lisona, a nearby neutral planet, via my flagship. I have to deliver an ambassador there anyway. The Rukantee know we trade with several of the planets that they also trade with. They wouldn’t do anything about us, and treaties also prevent us from fighting with each other in those neutral spaces. You will take your team’s mini cruiser out to their system via stealth warp. The probe also detected more sensitive sensors within that system. This is a sign the system is a high stake strategic location. Your boat will have to drop out of warp about a light-hour away from the system and drift the rest of the way powered down.”

“Also,” Rashid adds, “we won’t be cloaking if anyone is wondering. Their sensors can detect cloak, but our boat has passive stealth plating. It was installed a few months ago, but this is the first time we’ve needed it. Their scanning signal will get redirected around the ship and the plating also has optic-camo so we should be safe unless we put on a light show.”

“My ship is in Duilius Military Dry Dock 8,” Hayley informs them. “Your boat is already there and the contents of your armory have been beamed on to your cruiser as well. Be down there in thirty minutes. Dismissed.”

Michelina holding in her emotions, quickly turns around eyes starting to be teary and speeds off.
“Was I too harsh?” Ed asks Kokoro as they are walking to the dry dock.

“You said similar things to me when I joined the team,” Kokoro replies.

“I did?”

“You did. The rest of the team wasn’t so disapproving, but you were almost as harsh as you were just now. You are just caring.”

“I don’t feel like that was caring.”

“You are. You just don’t want her to turn into us at that young age.”

“How are you so calm? You seem like you are used to this, war and death.”

“Onii-sama, you know I can relive my ancestor’s memory with my Ability. For some reason, I can only relive the memory of my grandfather’s youth in the forties. Ever since I was little, I’ve been experiencing the aftermath of an a-bomb explosion. I’m desensitized to death, I guess… I don’t like my job but I don’t want anyone else today to experience anything similar to what happened to my grandfather. I know I can protect them from what’s out there. But you already know that, so you should be asking yourself that question. What’s in it for you, and even Caracara, you two are average Americans living in stable lives as far as I know.”

“My sister had joked around saying our family has the soldier genes since there is a soldier in every generation of my family. Maybe I’m just born to be a soldier… but it’s still uncomfortable sometime.”

Michelina is from Italy. As an orphan with no living relatives, she waited for a caring family to adopt her, but for some reason, no one adopted her for over a year. From standard brain and genetic scans we do for recruitment, we noticed her when her brain started to develop. When she was only a few months old, her brain was as developed as those a few years older than her. She started speaking full complete sentences that made sense by eighteen months. Her potential was and still is high. Given her situation as an orphan with low statistical probability of being adopted by a family that
can bring her to her true potential, she would have no chance to become the next Einstein or anyone world changing, that’s why we adopted her, so she can shine here instead of being another insignificant piece of statistic back on Earth.

Michelina is also special to me personally. She is the youngest person to meet me. Usually, with luck, I only grant a few commissioned officers below the rank of general to meet me directly. Michelina is somewhat of my personal project as well. I pushed her unit assignment through the three branches of Command. I need her. We need her. YOU need her.

The movie is finished. As Ed and his friends exit the screening room, the group separates to the restroom and to throw away their trash.

“Aren’t you a cowardly one,” Amelia says to Ed.
“Uh?”
“Don’t like action movies?”
“Sorta.”
“You’re boring.”
“If you say so,” Ed answers. “Plus, I am not a big fan of zombies.”
That’s an understatement. He hates zombies, probably because of one of the missions he had a few months back which involved a real zombie virus, which that in itself is a story for yet another time. Sitting through this movie is a big step for him. I’m so proud of him.

Outside of the theater, Amelia gives Ed a box, an unwrapped cardboard box.
“What is this?” Ed asks.
“Just open it.” Amelia prepares her camera to capture this moment.
“Wow.” It’s a pair golden colored cufflinks in shape of trombones. They look homemade. “Thank you, these are awesome!” Snap and flash.
“Glad you like them.”
The group slowly gathers outside of the front door.
“Yo dawg,” Gabriel jumps in between Ed and Amelia.
“What’s up?” Ed asks. Snap and flash!
“Nice interruption,” Amelia gives an annoyed look.
Gabriel waves her off. “I heard ya like vinyl records,” He saying smoothly, “so I put a record player in a CD player so ya can listen to music while ya listen to music!”

Ed scratches his head trying to comprehend what Gabriel had just said. “Okay….. Where is it?” Snap and flash!

“Dawg, how da hell am I supposed to bring it here?” Gabriel exclaims. “I drop by ya crib soon, rite dawg?”
“Take your time,” Ed laughs. Snap and flash!

Ashley waves a piece of paper in front of Ed’s face from behind. Snap and flash!

Ed grabs it. It reads “I O U.”
“What is this?” Ed asks.
“I owe you one favor. Whether it is helping you with school work or spying on someone, I’ll do it.” Snap and flash!
“You frighten me sometimes.” Ed jokingly says.
“I am proud of that.” Ashley pauses, “Oh, and I won’t do anything sexual.”

Ed’s face is astonished. “You know me for half of my life. What kind of person do you think I am?”
“I know, but I have to establish the fine print for this little arrangement, just in case.”
“Okay.”

“My turn!” Sophie says and lifts up her top in front of Ed. “My present is, like, everything Ashley totally won’t let you do!”

Ed would be so lucky if he is an average teenage boy but of course he doesn’t care. He is used to seeing people naked.

PUNCH!!!!

That is Ashley punching Ed. No doubt he is able to dodge this pathetic punch but he doesn’t even try to flinch from Ashley’s light hearted attack. He does dodge her more heavy handed attacks when she dishes them out.
“SOPHIE!!” Ashley yells.

“Why did you punch me and not her?” Ed asks as he gets up from the ground.

“I don’t want her private army of ninjas to ambush me,” Ashley answers. “Call off your snipers Sophie!”

“Oh please. I’m not, like, one of those rich brats,” Sophie puts her shirt back down.

Gabe is on the verge of tears for not being able to see anything.

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Gabe is on the verge of tears for not being able to see anything.
Sophie pushes back, “If you refuse, I will, like, totally hate you. If you destroy it, I will, like, totally hate you. If you, like, never watch it, I will totally hate you.”

“… Fine.” Ed says and puts the card into a pocket. Snap and flash!

Sophie Bennett is academically the number one student in Ed’s school. She is a great linguist and speaks four different languages. She is a mathematician that can do complex calculus and probability in her head. As a biologist, she synthesized a virus after reading a study on how to do so. She artificially created and patented a new chemical as a chemist. She achieved so much more, practically a renaissance person. Also, she is quite wealthy if you can’t tell already. She is the heir to one of the top pharmaceutical companies in the world. But she is... well, as Ed said, a physically charitable person. However, she is not the kind of person that gets a new boyfriend every week. In fact, she never had a boyfriend before. Sophie simply offers her ‘talent’ to any guys and gals who want it. Because she refuses to be ‘charitable’ to people who are already in a relationship, and being very friendly and helpful person to most people, most girls in the school doesn’t hate her.

“My turn!” Nina yells to break the awkwardness that Sophie caused. She takes out a homemade keychain with a one inch gray cube made from Sculpey with random specks of blue colored square imbedded into it using hot glue. Snap and flash!

“Oh wow, you shouldn’t have. Diamonds are rare,” Ed jokingly says.

The others look at them with confusion since they don’t get the Minecraft reference.

“Now me!” Lisa says. She opens her purse and pulls out a pair of opera glasses. “Here you go hon’.” Snap and flash!

“Sweet. I always wanted one of these.” Ed takes the glasses with joy. “Thanks! Where did you find it?” Snap and flash!

“You can’t believe what kind of treasure you can find at Goodwill.”

“I’ve got to go shopping there more often.”

Snap and flash! Snap and flash! Snap and flash!
“Would you stop,” Ed smiles and laughs. “You are blinding me!”
“I don’t feel like it.” Amelia makes a face and SNAP and FLASH!
Ed takes her camera out of her hands and raises it up.
“Give it back!” Amelia jumps up and down for it.
“Ha Ha!” Victorious laughter.
Amelia makes a sad face on the verge of bursting out into tears.
“Okay, okay! Don’t force yourself to cry.” Ed gives her camera back. He’s too nice to make anyone cry.
“Yay!” Amelia bounces back into joy.
Ed shakes his head with a smile.
“Come on kids, let’s go home.” Dan drives his van up to the curb.
“Lisa, guess what I got?” Ed asks while walking to the van.
“What?”
“I downloaded *Let the Right One In.*” *Blush*
“The Swedish vampire movie that *Let Me In* is based on?”
“The very same,” Ed is the last to get on the van.
“That is so cool.”
“Are you doing anything tomorrow? I can bring it over and we can watch it together.” Ed’s heart beats faster and faster.
“Sure hon’! That sounds fun.”
“Awesome, I’ll come by tomorrow afternoon.”

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= Sept. 11, 2010. 06:45 pm Greenwich Mean Time =

= Sept. 11, 2010. 01:45 pm Central Standard Time =
Duilius Military Dry Dock Complex, The Grand Ship over the dark side of Earth’s moon
The N.C.T. (Navis Curator de Terra) Wisdom of the Queen is Hayley’s flagship. He is state of the art. It can reach the next quadrant of our galaxy in three months with maximum warp. His weapon is capable of destroying a star. Although he has an aggressive side, he also has a gentler side too. He has a medical
facility that can treat up to five hundred people. It can carry up to two thousand people, but minimum operation requires only twenty.

The Queen’s basic shape looks similar to a broadsword. His hull is mainly white. On each side of the hull has the Queen’s name and registry number written in English, Latin, Rusian, Aribic, Chinese, Egyptian, and Mayan.

“Hey March,” Hayley says as she enters the bridge along with the Night Hawk team. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Yes Master,” March replies with a slight Australian accent. He is the Queen’s AI, who is also Hayley’s personal adjutant AI. Basically, he is the ship, which is also why the Queen is called a he rather than a she. “I’ve been keeping your seat warm. My system and body is running at optimal level.”

“Thank you,” Hayley says as March uncrosses his legs and stands up from the command chair with his tea cup in one hand. Being one of the most charming AI I know, he takes off his white fedora, which matches his white hair, and takes a little bow towards Hayley before she sits down. He is also one of the most adorable AI I know too, he always has many bunny paraphernalia on him.

“Do you want some Earl Grey?” March offers.

“Please and thank you. Do get a cup for the Colonel too.”

“Thank you, madam,” Rashid says.

“Helm, take us out at 90% celeritas and go to warp after we pass Ceres.”

“Aye madam,” the helmsman replies.

One celeritas is the speed of light.

“Damn! This place is larger than our cargo bay,” Leilah says.

“Man, we need to get a screen this size for Tomorrow,” Caracara says as the others admire the large bridge.

“Captain Zhang doesn’t like view screens and this thing can barely fit into our cargo bay,” Erasto taps the screen.

“View screens make flying more difficult on a small vessel,” Ed adds.

“How would you know?”

“I am a trained pilot for fighters and shuttles,” Ed replies.
“Can you fly Tomorrow?” Faustine asks.
“I can, but I don’t have the license for a boat that size.”
“Who needs a license? Your flying skill could save our ass someday,” Caracara says.
“I hope my skill won’t be needed,” Ed says
“Shush! We’ve just passed Ceres,” Kokoro presses her face onto the glass of the holographic view screen.

After traveling for about twenty minutes at ninety percent the speed of light, they are ready to warp from behind the dwarf planet Ceres, which used to be categorized as an asteroid.

The space right in front of the ship fizzes and glows blue. The ship’s sub-light engines dim and shutdown then the pylons on the sides of the ship glow white. The ship accelerates forward with a circle of exhaust energy with a sharp whooshing sound screams inside the ship as it disappears into a light sparkle.

“I can never get bored of the sight of jumping,” Kokoro says in awe to herself.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 07:27 pm Greenwich Mean Time =

= Sept. 11, 2010. 02:27 pm Central Standard Time =

Interstellar non-sovereign space

On the launch deck of the ship, the N.C.T. Tomorrow Never Dies is sitting on a runway, waiting for deployment. Tomorrow is a Brosnan Class Tactical Support Micro Cruiser. The small, black, sleek triangular shaped ship has four decks and little to no luxury. It can cloak, divert sensor beams around itself, and it leaves a negligible amount of energy trail. This boat also houses a little vertical takeoff and landing shuttle. Tomorrow is a little boat that could... kick some ass from the shadow in silence.

Ed enters the ship from the front ramp and head to the armory for preparation.

Weep

Ed stops in front of doors and listens.

Weep

The white doors to the armory whooshes open sideway.

Weep
Ed enters.

Silent

Ed looks around with suspicion. He sneaks and wall hugs a line of lockers. Slowly pressing his ear onto each locker, he silently moves slowly. Step by step, locker by locker. He hears complete silence, not even breathing sound.

“Anyone there?” Ed asks.

Ed closes his eyes and looks beyond. Psych Vision, Ed can see anything living around him for a short distant. If the dimensional and emotional condition is right, he can even see those who were once living too, ghosts. He sees a dark void with sparkles of white dots with blue glows. He sees some people walking on the flight deck outside of Tomorrow, a small concentration of dim sparkle inside a locker which probably is a bottle of pro-biotic yogurt drink, and a large bright clump of bright sparkling light inside another locker.

Ed approaches that locker and opens it. Michelina is in it, not breathing. She sighs and takes a breath.

“You okay?” Ed asks with concern.

“Fine, I am just putting myself into an emotional state that is appropriate for the mission,” Michelina is obviously lying as the redness in her just-turned emotionless eyes is slowly fading away and she is attempting to hide the tear soaked spots on her sleeves.

Ed notices the melancholy beneath her blank face, “I am sorry.”

“For what reasons are you apologizing for?” Michelina gets out of the locker.

“For what I said earlier,” Ed crouches down so he can talk at an eye-to-eye level with Michelina.

“You do not have to apologize. As my superior, you have every right to criticize my flaws,” Michelina takes a seat on a bench in front of the lockers and her voice turns from emotional to logical but her voice is still cracked from all the crying. “I was the one acting out of line. I should not have said those things about everyone. I am sorry.”
“I wasn’t criticizing your flaws. I don’t even know your flaws yet. Being a child isn’t a flaw. I know you are thinking it,” Ed is starting to sound old.

“Your intuition is accurate, but the fact that I am a child does not make me any less able to contribute to the team.”

“I am sure you are a capable soldier, but I am worried about what you will see and do,” Ed sighs. “A job like this, we do things and see things we wish we didn’t. Well… except for Leilah, she enjoys these things.”

“I am fully capable of suppressing my emotion during missions. These things will not have repercussion that may cause me to jeopardize any mission.”

“You just don’t understand what I am saying.” Ed points at Michelina, “It is not the missions I am worried about. I am worrying about you and your psychological well being outside of your duties.”

“That is none of your concern.”

“Seeing you, how you act, reminds me of what my teacher used to say,” Ed says.

“What is it?”

“We sell our souls to protect everything we know and love.”

“That applies to you, not me. I do not have anyone I love back on Earth. No family, no country, no culture.”

“That is what I mean, you are so dedicated to the Guardian, it’s like you sold your soul to them. I don’t know if she is right. I certainly hope not, especially for you.”

“A soul is just an idea that people use to explain the inner unknown parts of themselves.”

“Isn’t a soul our psych pattern?”

“Psych pattern is scientific, it is the EEG pattern that we all have. It is not a soul. It is merely unique electrical patterns that gives us life.

“You are smart, but you are not wise yet. You are not an instrument of the Guardian. We might work for this powerful organization but you are not their property. You are your own person, make your own decisions, and don’t follow orders blindly.”
“I know that. They taught it during basic academy. You should never blindly follow orders and never fully trust those who have extreme amount of power.”

“It’s good that you know. I feel really bad for you and worry about you. Let me set an understanding between us. I will treat you like a kid and don’t expect me to treat you any other way. In my eyes, you will never be a soldier, at least for ten more years.”

“Your concern is noted. I know the others have similar opinions as you, but you are the first to share it with me. For that, I thank you, however, I see myself as a soldier and I will do my best and uphold The Oath.”

Silence

“I am glad you told me how you feel. Thank you, sir,” Michelina continues.

“One more thing,” Ed says as they walk out of the armory, “unless we are at a formal setting with officers not on the team, please don’t call me sir. Kokoro doesn’t do that and neither does my lower ranking roommates.”

“Yes….,” Michelina reorients her thinking and reluctantly says, “Edward.”

Chapter Two:
Obligation of a Child Soldier
Chapter Three

= Sept. 11, 2010. 10:12 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 11, 2010. 05:12 pm Central Standard Time =
Lisona, fourth planet of the Ferisal System

Wisdom of the Queen drops out of warp in the same spectacular fashion as he did when entering warp.

“We have entered the Ferisal System,” March announces over the com system as the ship sails into neutral territory, “Achieving standard orbit over Lisona in five minutes.”

The Night Hawk team assembles on the runway in front of Tomorrow Never Dies in a fashion not too dissimilar from those movies. The only thing missing is the slow motion walk towards their ship. Captain Zhang and the intelligence supports are also there, while the rest of Tomorrow’s crew is already inside.

“A list of objectives has already been sent to your suits’ computer,” Hayley says as she walks pass the team. “Any questions?”

The team stays in silence.

“I want every one of you to come back. I’ve never lost any one before, and I don’t want my record to be tarnished,” My little general says with an authoritative gaze. Yet her warmer side shines as that authoritative gaze turns into a soulful and caring gaze along with a gentle smile and she says, “Good luck. Don’t let me down.”

The team enters Tomorrow as the front entry hatch lifts up and folds to close. The front end of the hanger’s runway opens up into the vacuum of space with a thin, almost two dimensional, force field separating everyone on the runway in the hanger from death by ebullism where gas bubbles forms inside blood stream.

A flight engineer with two light sticks swings his arm signaling Captain Zhang that it is clear to take off. Yes we still have this kind of a job. We can easily replace them with robots or holograms but everyone loves the sight of a person guiding them off into space.
Tomorrow slowly accelerates with the murmur of the engine silencing as it passes the force field. The brilliant blue and green planet of Lisona is in the background as Tomorrow flies hundreds of kilometers above it. Dark lightless ripples appear in space in front of Tomorrow and then it engulfs the tiny cruiser, stealth warp.

Everyone on the team and some of the support team gather in the lounge to relax before the mission on deck two. There is a line of narrow windows on the ceiling towards the front of the room where the blue streaking light of the warp field cast down into the warm colored room. There is a kitchen on the left side of the room and a big dining table in the middle. There are also sofas and a TV on the right side of the room with smaller lounge chairs around the room with tables.

Leilah, Rashid, Caracara, and a few support crew members are playing a game of poker. As usual, Leilah has the biggest pile of chips in front of her. She smiles towards one of the intelligence analysts and even with a winning hand, he folds, allowing Leilah to win. Is she clever or is the crew afraid of her? I’m not able to answer that.

Kokoro, Erasto, and Faustine are enjoying a light hearted comedy on TV.

“Can I have your attention please,” Michelina says loudly in the middle of the room.
Everyone looks over.
“I would like to apologize for saying those insensitive comments about everyone. I am sorry,” Michelina remorsefully says with her head lowered and shoveling her feet.
“Apology accepted, Goddess,” Rashid says. And of course who wouldn’t accept an apology from an adorable kid?
“Pardon me, sir?” Michelina raises one eyebrow. “Why did you call me Goddess?”
“That is your codename.”
“Why is Goddess my codename?”
“Your name has a Hebrew and Latin origin, meaning, ‘Who is like God.’ ” Ed, who speaks fluent Latin, among other languages, explains, “It sounds like a fitting codename for you.”
“Thank you…” Michelina blushes.
“Welcome to the team,” Rashid says.
Michelina smiles.
“There is personal policy of mine for any new member.”
“What is it?”
“I will not allow you to be directly on the field and directly engage the enemies until you have participated in a few more missions. Understand?”
“Then how do you want me to apply my skill?”
“You are to stay with Faustine during the mission. She will be looking out for us from the outside and you will help with situation analysis and hacking. Your file says you are very proficient at it.”
“I will do the best,” Michelina says with energy.
As everyone goes back to doing whatever they were doing, Ed leaves via the staircase in the front.
“Where are you going Oniisama?” Kokoro asks.
“I forgot I have to give something to Captain Zhang,” Ed replies.
“Oh.”
Ed goes down to in the armory, two decks below. He opens his locker and takes out a six pack of German style beer. Ed carries the beer up to deck three, one deck above, and into the bridge. There Captain Zhang is sitting in the command chair which is slightly elevated in the middle of the bridge.
“Captain Zhang,” Ed says and hands Captain Zhang the pack of beers. “Here is your gift.”
“Thanks,” Captain Zhang replies. “My favorite brand too!”
“Just don’t drink on the job,” Ed jokes.
He better not!
“You know I won’t, I’ve worked too hard to lose my license.”
“Of course,” Ed laughs. “How long till we arrive?”
“We have a few hours before dropping out of warp. Our little engine isn’t as fast as General Carroll’s flagships.” Captain Zhang replies, “Then about fifty minutes of engine silenced drift.”
“Okay, thanks!” Ed starts to walk off the bridge, “Hope you like your beer.”
“You know I do.”

There is no penalty for small drinking, but it is just very unprofessional. However, if he does voluntarily intoxicated during his employment with us, even back on Earth, it would be a death sentence. We have very strict behavioral guidelines when it comes to brain effecting substances and chemicals. These are mostly for security issues so no one would accidentally say something they are not allowed to back on Earth, or worse, lose control over their Psych Abilities if they have any.

Ed returns up to the lounge and looks around for Kokoro. She’s not in the kitchen, not playing cards, and not watching TV. Erasto points him to the crew quarters one deck above them.

He enters his quarter, which is also shared with Kokoro, Erasto, and now Michelina as well. In the short room squeezed into the top of the ship, he finds Kokoro sitting up on her bed reading a Japanese light novel and Michelina taking a nap while scrunched up sucking her thumb.

“What are you reading?” Ed whispers.
“Nekomonogatari by Nisio Isin,” Kokoro holds her book up, “part of a series about spirits and the supernatural. There is also a really cute love story in the plot.”
“Cool,” Ed says.
“Do you know what a deus ex machina is?”
“‘God out of the machine,’ it’s an literary device where plot problem gets solved with no previous mention of a method.”
“This novel series has a few. I wonder if life or even our job would be easier if there are these things.”
“In our job or any military, it’s called the nuclear option.”
“You think so?” Kokoro disappointingly asks.
“Well, if you blow your problem up, it disappears, so it gets solved.”
“Enemy is your problem, blow them up, problem solved. I can’t argue that’s not true, look at our grandparents’ generation.”
“For me, it was my great-grandparents but that’s not the point. It works if you end the story right away, which reality doesn’t do. The easy way to solve a problem creates more problems. If the following problem is solved with another deus ex, then it will make even more problem. So the only way to solve all the problems in the universe using anything like the dues ex would be destroying the entire universe or even the omiverse so no problems can exist on any scale.”

“That’s scary. No way taking an easy way out would lead to that.”

“Let’s go back to the nuclear option. The Cold War would have been solved way sooner if both sides used this option. No more human, no more humanly problem. All problems have been solved because there is no one to have problems.”

“I guess I do have to agree, but my grandparents had sequels to that kind of ending, terrible sequels,” Kokoro sadly says with a down spirit.

Ed is very correct. The Grand Ship orbiting Earth has the destructive capability of wiping out a tenth of the Milky Way without taking a rest. Yet the political fallout of any serious actions like this would be far worse. Besides, what kind of example would we be setting for the kids we recruit if we do that?

“She looks so cute when sleeping.” Kokoro looks at Michelina and changes the subject. “I am glad about that policy the Colonel has.”

“Yeah, same here,” Ed nods and quickly diverge with Kokoro. “But she’ll reach the heart of the battlefield in a few missions,” Kokoro adds.

“I don’t want her to experience it. Maybe these few missions will help her change her mind.”

“I hope so too, but if her mind is really set on it, I don’t see her giving up. She is dedicated.”

“She’ll understand how we manage after a few missions, especially the hard ones.”

“Maybe…” Kokoro pauses.

But I don’t want her to. I want her to stay on the team, even if she is just relegated to a mere support staff.
“Have you ever wondered why the average recruitment age is ten?” Kokoro asks. “The maximum recruitment age is sixteen. Why so young, why not older?”
“Of course, I started wondering about that after getting my espionage degree.” That was two years ago, when he was still thirteen.

“For the greater good,” Michelina turns around but still scrunched up in a blanket.

“Sorry for waking you up,” Ed says.

“Do not worry. I am consciously aware and process any and all information around me, even when I am sleeping.”

“Okay…” Ed gives a weird look. “What do you mean for the greater good?”

“We need the naïve wisdom of the youth to better the world.”

Both Ed and Kokoro look confused.

“Children are blank slates. We recruit at a young age because we can help shield them from the sins of past generations. No hate, no prejudice, no lust, no self hate. By teaching you how to achieve those virtues and how to understand each other, these values will slowly trickle down into our, well… your, respective communities back on Earth. And eventually your influences on your respective cultures will slowly bring unity to the world and humanity will enter puberty.”

My child is completely correct. This is a slow progress but it works. Humanity is slowly learning how to avoid wars. Even in ongoing conflicts, the number of people dying is far less than wars in the past. The Geneva Convention was created. Collateral damages are concerned with more and more.

“We can just as easily make our self known and make wars impossible,” Ed says. “Why don’t we just do that?”

Yeah, we can blow up a tenth of the galaxy, taking over the world is easy as a sneeze.

“Same reason with why the nuclear option won’t work. It would create more problems. The great Albert Einstein once said ‘Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding.’ ”

“Makes sense…” Kokoro says, “I guess.”

“Tell me where in the world beside our Grand City where a Jewish youth and an Islamic youth can be best friends while their parents are constantly teaching them to hate each other? How
about a place where a Chinese youth or Korean youth cannot hold a grudge against a Japanese youth even with their parents teaching them to never let go of the past hatred?”

“What good is Our little ‘utopia’ flying all high and mighty when We are still using child soldiers?” Ed asks while air quoting the word ‘utopia.’ “We are child soldiers.”

“The child soldiers back on Earth are taught to be machines. Merciless and guiltless. All they do is rape and pillage,” Michelina explains. “What is the first thing you learned in military training?”

Every Employee has to through basic military training regardless of what department they are going into. The training involves defending against an invasion of Earth and nothing as in depth as any military training you’ll find on Earth.

“If you have to kill,” Kokoro tries to remember the contents of her class from two years ago, “Don’t do it with pride or something…”

Michelina sighs at their poor memory. “If you have to kill, do not do it with pride or joy. Do not justify the kill with excuses. Taking a life of a sentient being is always something to be felt guilty of. It is sad that they are our enemy. They have their reasons to fight us and we must defend ourselves but never ever be glad for lost of life. They have family and friends to fight for, so do we. They have worlds to protect, so do we. Even if they are conquerors, they do it for survival, so do we. They are sentient beings, so are we. We and our enemy, no matter what, has similarities. Always feel guilty after the theft of any sentient lives. Always show restraint when possible. Always show mercy when you can.”

“I do follow these words,” Ed says. “But the irony is we just blew up a base with a thousand Rukantee yesterday. What mercy?”

“The lesson says ‘when possible.’ Judging from the preliminary report, the explosion was powerful enough to kill everyone on that base instantly, no suffering. They’ll enter their highest tier of heaven reserved for their bravest warriors.”

Ed is sadly correct. We use children soldiers. But progress takes sacrifice. I don’t feel guilty in selecting who to recruit, as a matter of facts, I take pride in selecting those who will contribute to the growth of humanity on Earth. Ed, Kokoro, and everyone
else, I recommended everyone to the Human Resource Department, they then pick who they’ll attempt to recruit.
Ubf, the sounds of Ed’s chemistry book closing coming from his room. He is done with the honors homework he started after returning from the movie but stares out into space trying to think of ways on how he can apply what he is learning to his alchemic ability.

After a few minutes of pondering, Ed opens his trombone case and takes out his trombone. He’s trying to fit in some practice time before dinner, his birthday dinner, but before he starts, he yells out, “Come on out,” into nowhere.

“Every time!” Ashley says from the hallway outside his room.

“Please don’t expect you can sneak in my house without me knowing,” Ed says while looking at Ashley from the corner of his eyes.

You might be expecting Ed to ask her how she got into his house without knocking on the door or his mother announcing her arrival but Ed knew. Both Ed and Ashley know where the spare keys to each other’s houses are kept. Ed’s house key is usually kept under a flower pot with a magnet on his back porch. They usually walk in to each other’s houses without announcement and their families don’t care about it either.

“So this is what you’re doing on your birthday?” Ashley asks.

“I wanted to get a head start on my homework.”

“Lame! This is why you can’t get a girlfriend. And look at your room! Any girl would move a county away if they step into here.”

Ed’s room is white all around. There is a book shelf with science books and funnies comics, all categorized and alphabetized. There are a few non-fiction books, including Steven Hawking and Michio Kaku. These books neighbors funnies and slice of life comics including Peanuts, Garfield, and Yotsuba&!. He doesn’t own any book that is action packed or sad, unless they are school required.

He has some LEGO placed around his room. On the wall next to his bed, he has one lonely Simcity 4 poster. There are no posters of rock bands, rappers, or hot girls on the wall, but wait, he is classy, he has a poster for the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

80
Unlike other teenage boys’ room, there are no dirty clothes lying everywhere. It doesn’t even have the smell of a sweaty teenage boy in the air. His room might as well be an IKEA showroom. No, it is an IKEA show room since all the furniture in the house is from IKEA.

“You’re the one to talk,” Ed says, “Your room might as well be a Gamestop.”

“It’s cute for a girl to have rooms full of games and anime. Guys like it. But it’s a total turn off from a girl’s point of view.”

Ashley swipes Ed’s trombone and plays a small tune. Ed helplessly tries to grab it back but to no avail.

“It’s been since junior high when you last had a girlfriend,” Ashley says while leaning on his bed.

“And your point?”

“You’ve been missing an essential part of your high school experience for a year. You must get back into the game!” Ashley says with great seriousness.

“You mean asking someone out who I’m slightly attracted to then celebrate the one week anniversary and then we then break up in a week or two because we have nothing in common and possibly causing huge dramas, rumors, and unneeded attention for both people?”

Ed might be an optimist and wants to go out with Lisa, but he is also a realist. Ah… youth and romance, I’m a little envious of them. I haven’t been in love for eons.

“You don’t have to be this cynical…”

“What about you? You haven’t gone out with anyone for a year either.”

“I’m just picky…”

“Then can’t I be picky too?”

“What type of girls do you like anyway?” Ashley nosily asks.

“You never talked about it before.”

“It never came up.”

“It’s up now,” Ashley presses.

“…” Ed ponders a little. “She has to be a kind hearted person. She can’t be hateful. She has to understand me as much as possible and vice versa. We must be able to spend time together and even
doing nothing at all but still enjoy each other’s company. She has to be someone I’m willing to not only die for but to survive for.”

“Awww, how sweet and mature of him.

“Awww, how sweet and corny. What about the look? Blondes, brunette? Tall, short? Big boobs or my size?”

“I don’t care about that.” I’m glad that he doesn’t.

“Hmmmm…” Ashley doubtfully stares.

“And you?” Ed stares back.

“Handsome, strong, taller than me, brunette, knows how to cook, will do the dishes, can put up a fight, and must like what I like,” Ashley quickly lists off.

“Put up a fight?”

“I like a good friendly physical brawl sometime.” With the word ‘brawl,’ Ashley puts Ed into a chokehold.

“I give! I give!” He taps out.

“Dinner time!” That is Ed’s mother yelling from downstairs.

Ed and Ashley rush down. There is enough for the uninvited Ashley since Ed’s mother usually makes slightly more than what is needed.

Dinner is all of Ed’s favorites. Pepper grilled pork chop, pan fried mix vegetable, and smoked salmon. The salmon is from IKEA. If Ed’s life is a work of fiction, the readers must think these are paid ads.

They say grace and eats.

After dinner is cake time. The cake is a black forest cake made by Ed’s mom.

And after that, of course, is present time.

“Happy Birthday Eddy!” Elizabeth says. She hands him a card with crayon drawing of Ed as a prince giving her a piggy back ride. It says ‘Best brother a princess can ever have!’ How cute!

Ed says thanks and gives Elizabeth a hug.

Ellen gives Ed a box in gift wrap. He shakes it a little.

CRACKLE CRACKLE

The sound of plastic clattering.

Ed rips the gift wrap apart. It is a box of LEGO minifigures.

“Thanks!” Ed opens the box.
“Okay, Ed,” His dad says. “Let’s open ours before you start building.”

Ed’s mom takes out a long metallic attaché case.

“Is this one of your rifles?” Ashley asks Ed’s mom.

“The only way I’m giving any of my kids any of my guns will be through my will,” Ed’s mom answers. She still owns most of the guns, armors, and equipments she can legally keep from when she was in the CIA back in the nineties. She was globetrotting for the US government till around when Ed was around five.

Ed unlocks the case and opens it with twinkles in his eyes, a shiny new bass trombone. It is wider and more complex than the very common tenor trombone that most people are familiar with. It also has two triggers to control the pitch.

“Oh thank you mom and dad! I love you.” Ed jumps up and gives them a hug.

“There is one more present,” Ed’s mom says and she hands him a long box. “It’s from Grand-Grand.”

Ed opens up the box from his great-grandmother on his mother’s side.

“Is it even legal to ship this?” Ed pulls out a very old sword that is inside its sheath.

“Oh, she wanted to give you the Thompson machine gun she used from World War Two, so I told her to get you something normal,” Ed’s mom sighs, “Instead, she picks out a family heirloom that’s just as dangerous.”

“This is so cool!” Ashley screams.

“Is this the sword from the Hundred Years’ War?” Ed asks.

“I think it is,” Ed’s mom answers.

“Hundred Years’ War?” Ashley asks, “Your family history is very extensive. I don’t know much about before my great-grandparents moved here from Japan.”

“I don’t know how accurate it is, but legend goes the man who wielded this sword fought Joan of Arc and survived.” Ed unsheathes the sword slightly to look at the blade.

“Be careful with it. It may be six hundred years old, but it might still be sharp.”

“Okay mom. I’m going to call Grand-Grand to say thanks.”
Ed had says his family has always been a military family. His story isn’t a legend. I can trace the metal in that sword from some very old sensor data back to a battlefield in France where one of his ancestors did clashed swords with Joan of Arc.

Ashley is staying overnight at Ed’s, uninvited of course, but nobody minds it. She changes into shorts and t-shirt she had brought over and takes out a sleeping bag that she claimed in Ed’s closet.

She takes out a box from her large purse and throws it Ed. Ed catches it.

“Do you think I’d only give you an I.O.U. as your birthday present?”

Ed opens up the unmarked box. It’s a trombone mouthpiece.

“Thanks,” Ed says.

“You’re welcome!”

The two chat away in Ed’s room. They’ll probably stay up quite late because of shenanigans. Ed has to wake up early for church tomorrow.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 04:27 am Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 11, 2010. 11:27 pm Central Standard Time =
CXT-12834 System space

Woosh! The engines below the crew quarters changes sounds from a quiet wail to a hum.

“We are now in silent drifting,” Captain Zhang announces via the comm. system. “Scan of the planet will be completed in fifteen minutes.”

“An additional briefing will be held at that time in the briefing room,” Rashid adds in.

In the briefing room, the team and support team sits in rows facing a holographic screen.

“The planet has gravity of .892 g,” says Second Lieutenant Muteteli Colbert. She is a blue eyed half French half Rwandan
with braided hair. She is in charge of supporting the Night Hawk team from above. “Target area’s temperature is 12° Celsius. Air has 39% oxygen and also 68% chlorine. Don’t take off your helmet. Even the Rukante can’t survive out there without equipment.”

That’s saying a lot since the Rukante can survive in really harsh environments from extreme heat to extreme cold and even low oxygen level. Luckily they can’t breathe chlorine either.

“The main base is located on a plane, with only a handful of few gentle hills populated with some wildlife. Nothing hostile, mostly just plants and bugs,” Rashid describes and points on the map, “Far Seer and Goddess will land on this hill about three kilometers east of the base. Also, we are using the geographic north, not the magnetic north, which is on the south-east. Queen of Heart and Big M.A.C. will enter the base from the west rooftop, possibly a warehouse, and search around their storage for weapons and hardware. Guide Light and Butterfly will hit from the north and head to their underground facility to look for weapons caches or factories. Nitro and I will land in the center and search around their command offices for troop movement, intel, and strategies.”

“The planet has a rotational period of thirty-one hours and twenty-three minutes,” Lieutenant Colbert explains. “We will be arriving when the complex is near sundown, but it would take a while for the sun to go down so get inside as quickly as you can.”

“Everyone must hack into a computer connected to their mainframe to get a map of their area,” Rashid recommends. “Goddess will connect to your suit’s computer and partially help you by hacking remotely.”

“We will be monitoring all your movements and relaying them back to General Carroll in real time via wormhole communication. She will have the final decision in all situations,” Lieutenant Colbert informs them.

“Any question?”

No one speaks up. I might doubt the team for not asking anything if they were other squads, but I trust their professionalism in not having any questions.
“Remember, this is a non-lethal mission. We will be carrying live ammo, but I recommend carrying more non-lethal than lethal. If you have to knock a hostile out, hide the body,” Rashid reminds the team. “Let’s suite up, we’ll be there soon.”

And so, my boys and girls head to the armory to suit up. Leilah is grinning her teeth in irritation.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 05:51 am Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 12, 2010. 12:51 pm Central Standard Time =
Fifth planet of CXT-12834 System

In the fore airlock, the team assembles and just as time and time before, they put on their helmets and check their weapons. The airlock is draining its atmosphere and the main hatch opens. Below their feet is a green and purple planet.

“This mission is not going to be fun,” Leilah complains with a yawn.

“Missions are not supposed to be fun,” Michelina comments.
“Just a heads up,” Faustine kneels down and puts one of her arms over Michelina’s shoulder, “Leilah tends to get a bit unpleasant during non-lethal missions.”

“Of course I’ll be a bitch!” Leilah yells in rage. “The only reason why I like this job is because I get to kill and have blood splatter all over me. And the scent of blood I smell at the instant I take off my armor after the mission is really pleasing. Not to mention how much thrill there are from making another sentient being beg for mercy and giving them only disappointment and agony.”

“Watch your language around the little one,” Ed gives an unpleasing look.

Leilah continues to rant, “I mean the only reason why I joined this organization is because they let me kill on missions. I want to kill some beings! Is it so much to ask for? I just want to rip…”

“Shut it!” Caracara points a noise canceller at Leilah and talks to Michelina, “You don’t need her describing what she like to do, no one does.”

Leilah raises her arms and shakes them with anger. Her mouth is moving under her helmet but no sound is coming out.
“Can’t you mute her comlink? Her helmet is sealed.” Caracara asks Rashid.

“I’ve never thought about it,” Rashid walks towards the edge of the airlock. “She never went off in a tangent like this before.”

One of the questions Leilah asked when we recruited her was if she can still kill. We answered long as it is not on Earth and we sanction it. She might be cold hearted and blood thirsty, but I believe there is a shred of humanity left in her.

“Drop zone in a ten seconds,” Captain Zhang says via com.

“Everyone get ready!” Rashid stands on the edge of the ramp and looks down. “Remember, this is just a standard recon mission. Operation Surprise Preparation will be a cake walk.” He leans forward and drops.

The others follow. Kokoro thanks Captain Zhang as usual and jump out. Ed, the last one to jump, stands on the edge, and looks down into uncertainty, but staying positive. He takes a step forward and drops.

The flame from friction between the team’s armor and the atmosphere dies down as they emerge from the tall green cloud layer and separates into their respective pairs and targets. They glide down, spread their arms and legs out to slow down their descent, and deploy their force field chute.

Ed and Kokoro activate their armor’s holo-optic camouflage, a mix of hologram projection and digital optic display which covers their armors, to hide themselves as they near the Rukantee base.

Ed glides down onto the blue rooftop of the Northern section of the base and says, “Guide Light, landed.”

Kokoro lands after Ed, “Butterfly, arrived.”

The chlorinated-green sunset silhouettes Ed and Kokoro. They quickly get on their belly and crawl their way to the shaded side of the curved roof.

“Butterfly,” Ed looking around for a roof access, “After we download a map of this place, we are going to separate.”

“The usual full stealth movement operation, niisama?”

“Yup.”
Elsewhere in the sky, Faustine and Michelina are still falling. “Your approach is too fast,” Faustine says while listening to her sonar. “I know what I am doing,” Michelina laughs. “This is not a game, slow your approach now!” She strongly suggests. “I do not play games.” “Didn’t they teach you in training that a strong landing will kick up dust which could alert the enemy?” “This is a surprise to me!” “They don’t teach you those things in training. Slow down now!” Faustine yells into her mic. “That’s an order.” “Yes madam,” Michelina unhappily says.

The two land behind a hill. Faustine is graceful as a ballerina, not even a blade of purple grass is disturbed. “Far Seer, touchdown.”

My child skids and falls face down likes a kid learning to ice skate a few yards away from Faustine’s laughter. “Okay there?” Faustine asks. “Goddess has descended,” Michelina says without energy while lying face down on the prairie. “Get up, fillette,” Faustine kneels down beside Michelina. “Do not call me a little girl,” Michelina grunts and rolls over. “I see you know French,” Faustine offers a hand. “I know all languages,” Michelina takes Faustine’s hand and gets pulled up. “I know everything and anything.” “Don’t feel bad,” Faustine laughs, “I’ve performed worse landings before.” “We should continue with this mission,” Michelina pulls out her binoculars and treks to their designated position.

Michelina does know a lot. We still don’t know how she has learned much more than anyone in history since we started to do brain scans on people. Not only she can’t forget anything, she seems to be able to learn almost anything instantly as well. How she knows anything is not too much of an exaggeration. I’ve just never heard her say she knows everything and anything before.
Leilah and Erasto glide towards their target. Leilah lands first and skids across the roof.

“Queen of Hearts has hit the ground,” Leilah says.

“Are you crazy? Your landing made sparks fly.” Erasto scowls Leilah and lands silently near her. “Big M.A.C. has arrived.”

“What’s wrong with adding a little style to my landing? And if they notice me, then there is an excuse to rip them apart,” Leilah smiles.

I worry about the team because of her sometime. She hasn’t done anything against order yet, but her action can be considered jeopardizing on many occasions.

“You are not in a sorority where they perform overt missions,” Erasto yells at her over the com. “Camo now, just in case if we triggered something.”

“Yes, yes,” Leilah aggressively rolls her eyes and looks for a place to hide.

Their armors change colors and patterns to match its surrounding and a layer of hologram is displayed to complete the illusion, but they still cast shadows. Light isn’t bending around them, they aren’t using cloaking devices. The two quickly slither into a shaded area.

“Just sit tight,” Erasto orders. “I am going to find a hatch to get in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rashid and Caracara with their holo-optic camo already activated are trying to find a place to land on top of the command wing. However, there are too many skylights.

“We’ll make the approach and land on the beams between the skylights,” Rashid suggests.

“You crazy?” Caracara replies, “but this should be cool. You are going first.”

“Alright,” Rashid deploys the force field chute. He glides down and makes fine-tuned adjustments by moving his body. Rashid lands silently on his stomach on top of a three feet wide beam between two skylights. A perfect ten. I wouldn’t expect anything less from him. “Spearhead has pierced the target.”
“Damn, you are good,” Caracara follows Rashid and slows down his approach to line up with the beams and skylights.

“You look like you are coming in a bit too fast.”

“I know! I know! I’m trying to slow down!” Caracara stressfully yells and rolls himself up into a ball. He hits a beam and rolls down a small curve along it. Caracara lays face up, “Nitro, impacted.”

Rashid crawl in Caracara’s direction. “You alright?”

“Should have slow down a bit more,” Caracara puts his hands over his helmet.

“What’s done is done, let’s go,” Rashid says to Caracara and then presses on the side of his helmet, “Is everyone in position?”

“We found a hatch,” Ed pulls out some wires to patch in a hatch panel.

“Same here,” Erasto is doing the same thing.

“We’ve been picking flowers,” Faustine says as she listens to the others via her sonar scope on her sniper rifle.

“I am connected with all of your suits and am standing by for simultaneous hacking,” Michelina says with her helmet visor displaying information she needs for hacking.

“Everyone go in three,” Rashid reading the clock on his visor, “two,”

Ed holds out the wires and ready to connect to a panel.

“One.”

Michelina interfaces her brain with her suit’s computer.

“GO, GO, GO!!”

Lines of codes in the Rukantee language flashes on her visor as she hacks.

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The hatches open and the teams enter their respective areas.

Ed and Kokoro crawl into a maintenance tube. Slowly crawling down the tube, small in Rukantee standard, but a comfortable size for human, they search for a way to get into any of the greenish purple corridors.
They hit an intersection and Ed leads to the right.
“This way,” Kokoro points towards the opposite direction.
“Odd, a hatch is open,” Ed raises one eyebrow.
“This is the fastest way in, but it could be a trap.”
“Hold on,” Ed closes his eyes and look in psych vision. “I don’t see anyone waiting.”
“Let me check for traps with my EMF sensor,” Kokoro activates her electromagnetic field cameras mounted on her helmet. “Nothing either.”
“Let’s go then,” Ed sneaks out into the hallway. He spots a computer console and heads toward it, “Keep an eye out for me.”
“Okay,” Kokoro stands guard.
“Goddess, I am connecting to a terminal now.”
“Alright,” Michelina starts to hack with codes flashing on her visor. “This is unusual.”
“What?” Ed asks with concern.
“There are automatic countermeasures, but I am not detecting any live monitors at their security consoles.”
“What does that mean?”
Sound of footsteps echo the corridor.
“Standard Rukantee security procedures require any base and large ship to have at least three cyber security specialists on hand at all time trying to prevent what I am attempting to achieve.”
“Maybe you are just good,” Ed jokes.
The footsteps are getting louder and louder.
“My skill is above average and I can stay hidden from their detection if the specialists are here, but there are none here.”
“Ed,” Kokoro taps his shoulder, “We got company.”
“Can you hack this in the next two seconds?” Ed asks.
“Disconnect now,” Michelina says as Ed disconnects from the terminal. “I cannot get access to what you need in that amount of time.”
Ed and Kokoro move quickly into an adjacent corridor and activate their camouflage.
“I saw a group of four, all heavily armed,” Kokoro informs Ed.
“I hear them stop,” Ed takes his rifle out and loads a camera round into the grenade launcher attachment. He aims it back towards the corridor they came from. With one eye closed and the other looking down the scope, Ed holds his breath and pulls the trigger. The camera launches out of Ed’s gun with a quiet puff sound, like a spray from a can of air freshener, and it flies towards a wall. The soft adhesive head of the camera squishes onto the wall with the camera facing the team of four Rukantee guards. Ed’s helmet visor displays the camera’s telemetry.

They are about seven feet tall and all have four eyes. One of them is wearing silvery blue armor, like a knight, others are wearing plain blue. The silvery one is also wielding a battle ax. They are looking at the maintenance tube where Ed and Kokoro came in from.

Ed didn’t need to shoot that camera to listen in. Their helmet has excellent audio detectors, but with that large group of guards, Ed probably just wants to take some insurance. Those tiny cameras are also distraction tool filled with knockout gas.

“This hatch was opened,” their suits’ computer translates what the guards are saying.

“Curses! The gods are not smiling upon us today,” another guard says.

“Command,” another guard uses his comm. “There has been an unusual disturbance at our location. What are our orders?” it pauses, “Kill on site, understood.”

“Remember to stick together. We can’t afford to lose more Rukan,” the guard with a silver-blue colored armor says, and the guard group runs off. One of them says a prayer as it is running.

“Spearhead, I am sending you what I just saw,” Ed says over his comm, and heads back to the computer console and reconnects. “The Rukantee seems to be on alert.”

“Alright, be careful,” Rashid is worrying as he observes the administrative area from an air shaft. “They are on alert here as well, I don’t know why.”

“But none of us tripped an alarm,” Ed replies.
“We must have tripped something, we’ve never seen them on this high of an alert without tripping something. For now, continue as planned.”

“Yes sir.”

I don’t like this at all. Never had the Night Hawk enter a base with guards already on alert but without the sound of alarm accompanying them.

“I am done,” Michelina says via comm, “You are the last team for in need of my hacking assistance.”

“Wasn’t my fault,” Ed replies and then looks at Kokoro, “There is a large elevator shaft to the lower levels in the adjacent section.”

“Okay, I’ll head east and then meet you in this small storage closet here,” Kokoro sets a rally point on the map.

“West for me it is. See you soon.”

“Be careful onii-sama,” and so they set off in their own ways for now.

There are patrols down every corridor Ed looks down, even the non-vital ones. Ed is stressing out more than usual and sweating in his suit. Uncomfortable and unusual, his suit adjusts its climate control automatically, as it should, to help Ed with the stress, yet it is not doing enough.

“How did you receive your code name?” Michelina asks over the com.

“This is NOT a good time for chit-chat,” Ed replies as he distracts a group of guards away from the path he needs to take with a remote directional noise maker.

“This is a perfect time for some light conversation.”

“I am kind of busy,” Ed says being annoyed while he sneaks around a corner after the guards walk passes him in attempt to investigate the distraction noise.

“I know. I am monitoring everyone’s stats and your heart rate is higher than your average during other missions,” Michelina says as she is lying on her stomach on a hillside with her feet swinging back and forth.

“I am trying to see what your point is, but I am not seeing it. And you are still distracting me.”
Hmm… I know Michelina is trying to be helpful, but does she know she isn’t helping?

“I am trying to lower your stress level. Sometimes, on the battlefield, it is more important to be calm and slightly distracted, rather than worrying about everything, even unimportant matter.”

“What do you know about being on the battlefield?” Ed asks slightly annoyed. “No offense, but you’ve never been on the field.”

Ed reaches another section of corridor with another group of guards. This time, the corridor is a bit different with lights hanging from the ceilings.

“I absolutely have to agree with this. However, I do have a master degree in Battlefield Psychology.” This is one of many degrees that she has. Let’s see… Michelina has a master in Psyonic Theory, Warp Engineering, Earth’s Global History, and these are just the ones she earned when she was five. She’s currently working on getting a PhD on Quantum Teleportation.

“I just have a bad feeling about this, that’s all. Now you know what’s going on, let me do my work.” Ed climbs onto the lights and slowly and quietly crawls over the guards. One of the guards is looking up too but it doesn’t look like he is suspecting a thing.

“You are still stressed. Telling me this does not help calm you down. Please simply trust me. What I want to do will help you relax and improve your mission performance.”

“Fine,” Ed sighs as he drops back down and sneaks into a circular stairwell. “I’ll give it a try.”

“We can start by answering that question I asked,” Michelina says while lying on the prairie and enjoying the green sunset.

“I am the only one on the team who has Psych Vision,” a small patrol group is walking up the stairwell. “I am the guide light that helps the team to see in the darkness of the unknowns during missions.”

“I can see Psychion too.” She’s referring to the subatomic particle that Psychie uses.

“Really? What are the odds of that?” Ed jumps off the stair’s railing passing a several floors.

“One in four-thousand Psychies can see Psychion, how much they can see is a different statistic.”
One of the guards pokes his head out and looks down.  
“We are really rare.” Ed quickly grabs on to the railing and climbs back into the stairwell. 

Nothing happens, the guard doesn’t notice him. If he has, there would be a lot of noise. 

“Indeed we are!” Michelina says. “I know how most of the other’s got their code names but why is Spearhead the Colonel’s code name? Where did that name come from?”

Ed’s heart rate is slowing down even with his intense physical activities. I’m surprise Ed is reacting this well to Michelina’s plan.

Codenames a generally given by the leader of the squad. Caracara’s codename is Nitro because he can alchemically rip apart nitrogen bonds and therefore making anything containing nitrogen a possible bomb. I already talked about Erasto and how he is a magnetic acceleration cannon or M.A.C. for short. Faustine’s name of Farseer is a bit ironic, but with proper equipment, she can hear farther than what most people can see and that’s how her hearing works, not any special ability. Kokoro’s favorite weapon is the butterfly knife, therefore, her codename is Butterfly. Queen of Heart is for Leilah because she almost exclusively uses a deck of solid diamond blade playing cards as her weapon and her favorite card is the queen of heart. As for Rashid, I’ll let Ed explain it…

“He was like me when he was first assigned to the team,” Ed exits the stairwell on the bottom floor.

“How? According to his files he is a Category E. It is genetically impossible for him to possess Psychie Abilities of any kind. Unless you are referring to the weapon of choice.”

Ed finds yet more guards patrolling the corridors of this level. He peeks around a corner and notices all the guards in different location can see each others. There is no way he can sneak out in the corridor. Ed opens up his map and finds himself a private little maintenance tube to crawl in.

“No, weapons have nothing to do with it. Abilities aren’t very important either. Instead, he has intuition. From the little that I know about his civilian life, he has been fighting since he was very little. He is from Afghanistan and because of his experience in a war torn country, he has a battlefield sixth sense of some sort. I am
a bit surprised that a person like him, who seen countless tragedies and lost many loved ones, still has faith in humanity as a whole.”

“So that is the reason.”

“Yes, he is the spearhead of the team,” Ed stops and focuses back on the mission while he peeks from behind a maintenance tube access panel. “This is weird.”

“What is unusual?”

“There is a group of Rukantee fortified in a corridor section. It is the only way I can go down to the lower levels without using the elevator.”

“They might be anticipating us,” Michelina speculates.

“It wouldn’t be weird normally, but they placed automatic plasma turrets facing both sides of the corridor. Why would they have a turret facing the direction where the intruders can’t get to?”

“Interesting. I have not learned of any defensive tactics of that nature.” So much for knowing everything and anything…

“I can’t get around that many guards without causing a commotion. I think there are ten of them. Is there any other ways?”

“There is the path down which Butterfly is using.” Michelina plays with a pair of purple butterfly-like insects hovering over her. “However, if you encountered a blockade here, it would be highly likely for her to encounter a similar situation on her path too. You must utilize the elevator on your side to reach a lower level. I will notify Butterfly on the situation.”

“Calling an elevator will surely draw their attention.”

“There is a maintenance tube junction a floor above you,” Michelina inspects the map on her visor. “It should connect with the elevator shaft.”

“Thanks for the assists.”

“I am only doing my assigned duties.”

Ed climbs up a floor via the maintenance tube and into the elevator shaft. He holds himself up onto one of the magnetic rail that holds up the elevator and slowly descends.

Chapter Three: The Descends
Chapter Four

= Sept. 12, 2010. 01:00 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 12, 2010. 08:00 am Central Standard Time =

This beautiful warm Sunday morning is time for staying inside a church and listening to sermon. Ed, dressed in his Sunday’s best, gets into the family van with the rest of his family. Off to church they go. Ashley left for home already after eating breakfast.

“I don’t want to go to church! It’s SO boring,” Ellen wails in the back seat.

“We are going young lady,” Ed’s father says authoritatively.

“I do enjoy this same argument we must have every week,” Ed’s mom complaints with sarcasm.

“But we go every week. I’m sure that out of every weekend of my life, they’ve gone over every single page of the Bible already.”

“Is it so much for God to ask for just a few hours of your life each week?” Ed’s mom asks.

“It is.”

“Well then, I guess it is too much to ask for internet access.”

Ellen snaps into an obnoxious and sarcastic happiness, “Well, God did give me life, not you, and asking only for a few hours is very generous of God to request.”

“Glad you change your mind,” Ed’s mom says and turns to her husband, “Let’s go!”

“Eddy, do you like going to church?” Ellen asks. “You should be old enough to escape this.”

“I like the calmness.” Ed replies. “Besides, you can learn something.”

“Oh, like how I should be the property of a man?”

“Take it with a grain of salt. Some of what’s in the book is out of date and many things were based around politics of the time, but it doesn’t take away from its value.”

“I don’t remember learning these things from Sunday school.”

“I did a research paper on it. Several gospels were rejected because of politics.”
Ed is not deeply religious. He is a Protestant but very open minded about other religions and mythologies. They are more like truthology to him. He is a big fan of real Quiditch matches played with flying brooms. He has seen angels summoned onto the battlefield, the dragon flight squadron in action, and even Buddhist deities in disaster relief efforts. He has to be open minded after witnessing what he had.

Every night, Ed prays before bed. He whispers his prayer ever so quietly and I can hear them. His prayers never involve himself and ever since a few months ago, he has been praying for two non-Earthling human which he indirectly caused their death. He finds solace from his guilt in these prayers and he fully knows he will go to hell for what he has done.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 01:13 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 12, 2010. 08:13 am Central Standard Time =
Fifth planet of CXT-12834 System

It has been hours of searching. Every room and every corner is being searched. This isn’t really unusual. Most recon missions like this involve snooping around with barely any action. I can fall asleep from the boredom if I can physically sleep. This base has about the same amount of weapon storage than any other Rukantee base but it does have more labs than other bases. Most of these labs seem archeological in functionality. There is nothing special here but guards are patrolling on heighten alert and standard weapons.

But…

Leilah and Erasto finally find something unusual.

They reach the most out of reach level of the warehouse section. Leilah hooks her suit up to a computer console and waits for Michelina to do her work.

“I cannot open this,” Michelina says.

“Why the hell did they put you in charge of hacking,” Leilah asks annoyingly.

“I have the capability to hack almost any system in existence. I deduct the problem here is caused by mechanical malfunction. You must to derive some other methods to physically open the doors.”
“Lucky I am here,” Erasto puts his hands on the door.
“Work you science, baby,” Leilah cheers.

Erasto surges electricity from his body forward onto the door translating into magnetism. His suit partially shuts down to protect its electronic components. My walking talking magnet slowly slides open the reinforced steel door.

“I smell something nice,” Leilah smiles as the door cracks. Her definition of nice is not your definition of nice. If it is, you should go see a psychologist.

“You can smell in the suit?” Erasto asks as the door opens, revealing a warehouse with mountains of large boxes all covered in tarps.

“I have an app for that,” Leilah walks into the warehouse. She has an extra scent emitter in her suit that generates the scent of whatever her suit detects outside of it. It’s an optional feature and not everyone likes this kind of thing.

“Well… what smell so nice?” Erasto follows her and slowly closes the door.

Her suit is reading overwhelming putrid smell, something along the line of, if not worse than, rotten eggs. There is a bit of methane. Some people might prefer the scent of week old garbage or even diarrhea than what is in the air right now.

“Flesh, rotting flesh” Leilah walks towards a pile of boxes hidden under a tarp. “Recently deceased bodies, lots of them.”

“What?”

Leilah yanks the tarp off, revealing pile of transparent coffins with Rukantee bodies in them. Each one is large enough to fit four humans, and there are about a hundred of them. All of the coffins have a blue triangle logo with three adjacent triangles on each corner and a set of words around it. On their helmets’ visors, the computer displays a translation the logo, “biohazard.”

“Boss,” Erasto says. “We got a pile of problems here.”

“What is the problem,” Rashid asks over the com.

“There is a pile of coffins marked biohazard,” Erasto looks closer at them, “They are all Rukantee.”

“Can you tell how they died?”
“Boring, far as I can tell,” Leilah lays on top of the coffins, “standard Rukantee biohazard containment sterilization protocol. Some of them do have burns from explosions. A few have their limbs torn off. Disappointingly, none of these works are beautiful.”

“Proceed with caution. They might have a toxin or biological incident from weapons research.”

“Aye sir,” Erasto says.

While it is rare to see the result of a sterilization event, this isn’t any different from what We had seen before. Whatever happened here, they followed the usual procedures, but what caused it is having me worried. From what the team has found so far, there is no evidence to support chemical or biological weapon development. What kind of archeological research station would need to sterilize its crew?

Erasto looks back to Leilah. “Girl, get off those boxes. Show some respect would you?”

“I can care less about human, why would you think I would even have the slightest respect for these sons of bitches?”

“Their average intelligence is three times higher than the average human. Using your sense of logic, you should have more respect for these things.”

“You sure are funny. Whatever happened, this has to be an accident or sabotages.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Well, speaking of respect, the Rukantee are proud and efficient warriors. They take the art of the battle very seriously, not beautiful compared to my work, but still very good. They have lots of long range missiles, but they practically never use them. Most Rukantee warriors prefer to look into their enemies’ eyes. Chemical and biological weapons would take away from that kind of battlefield intimacy.”

“I sure hope those bodies were caused by accident. Less paperwork for us to do after this.”

Leilah jumps onto another coffin. “Uh?”

“What?”

Leilah heart rate increases. “This can’t be…”

“What can’t this be?” Erasto looks up at her.
She crouches down on top of a coffin. “No way… I can’t believe this.”
“Tell me what’s going on?”
“This one…” Leilah slowly says. “Has small battle hatchets stabbed into both of its hearts.”
“And?”
“These are intentional attacks. They were brutal attacks, nothing elegant about it. One Rukantee to another.”
There are several other coffins with similar cause of death. Some are from Rukantee battle ax, others are from energy weapons. Now this is getting interesting and troublesome.
“Friendly fire?” Erasto asks.
“It is impossible! They are very careful and efficient. Friendly fire would disgrace their family songs.” Leilah is panicking a bit. This is a first I’ve seen her like this since we recruited her but then again, this is the first time we’ve seen Rukantee died by the hands of their own kind.
“Boss,” Erasto calls up Rashid again. “We found something troubling among the corpse.”
Leilah calm herself, “Some of the bodies were killed by Rukantee weapons very brutally.”
“Friendly…” Rashid replies but cut off.
“No. You stop hacking your comrade after one hit, not continue hacking them until a limb falls off.”
“Could we be witnessing the start of a civil war?” Erasto asks. Yes please, this would make Our job a lot easier but I highly doubt it.
“No. Their last civil war was ten thousand years ago. They have a system to fight it out in arenas.” Leilah jumps off the boxes.
“I’ll look into it on this side,” Rashid replies. “Just keep gathering any information you can. Over and out.”
Leilah and Erasto move on further into the warehouse.
This is very odd. Leilah is right, this cannot be friendly fire. Despite my hope, civil war is out of the question. We would have heard something on other intelligence channel if it is. I am worried now. Now I can’t rule out chemical or biological weapons research. It would explain what has happened if there was some
kind of mind altering chemical or organism what was leaked into the air.

Up in the administrative section, Rashid and Caracara are sneaking along maintenance tubes towards a communication array’s computer control room. Taking any other ways is problematic because of the heavy foot traffic of the office workers.

“Give me a jungle or remote base anytime,” Caracara whines as he crawls behind Rashid. “I hate moving inside tubes like these.”

“These spacious thing? Well then, be my guest and drop down below to the office. Most of them are unarmed, I am sure their strength are no match for you,” Rashid disapprove of his complains with sarcasm.

Sarcasm aside, I am sure that their strength ARE no match of him, at least for some time.

“Oh, you’re lifting our total stealth order?” Caracara almost hits his head with his sarcastic gesture.

Rashid sighs in disapproval.

They finally arrive above the relay control. They turn on thermal vision and they see nothing but an empty room with nothing but computer server towers under them.

Rashid taps into a wire around the hatch to the room below. “Goddess?”

Michelina hacks into the sensors around the hatch, “You two have exactly three seconds to enter the room and close the hatch.”

“That window is longer than expected,” Rashid complements.

“I was told I am the best.” It’s true that her mentors told her she is the best, but I’m starting to notice the big ego in her. She’s like one of those new celebrity who thinks they are all that. She really needs to learn how to be humble from some of the team members.

“Are you two ready for this?” Michelina says while walking behind the hill and looking at the exotic flowers.

“Yes.”

“Go Go Go! Go Go!!”
Rashid opens the hatch, slithers down like a snake, and Caracara follows suit then closes the hatch.

Zero point six three eight second left before the alarm would trigger.

Michelina says, “You two took your time.”

“You gave us a big window,” Caracara says.

“If you liked hacking a hatch sensor, then this would be fun for you,” Rashid hooks up a set of wires into the large greenish crystalline server tower.

Michelina picks a few flowers as she analyzes the system, “This computer system has a series of medium security firewalls with several looping layers and an automatic security alert system.” She gives the flowers to Faustine. “I had hacked a simulation of this when I was four with a counter hacker. There are no counter hackers at the moment so this should be relatively simple to achieve.”

Faustine puts the flowers into a pocket on her shoulder pad and smiles.

“I don’t need to hear how easy it is, I need to know if you can do it or not,” Rashid says.

With a few taps on a keypad, a few thousand command prompts flashing by on Michelina’s visor and a few seconds later, “I am finished.”

“Thank you,” Rashid says. “Let’s see what they’re talking about.”

“I will help with the analyze process,” Michelina volunteers.

“Go ahead, but don’t over work yourself, the team watching over us is analyzing too.”

Seeping through exabytes of data takes time, even with a super computer onboard their boat. An exabyte is one billion times larger than a gigabyte.

“I found this weird anomaly,” Lieutenant Colbert says from Tomorrow. They are inside the situation room in the front of the ship.

“What is weird?” Rashid asks.

“They are…” Michelina and Colbert say in unison.

“Sorry madam,” Michelina apologizes, “go ahead.”
“They sent a distress message an hour before our arrival.”
“Did they detect our boat dropping out of warp?” Rashid asks.
“Negative.” Michelina says. “The base has anti-orbital cannons. The planet is also protected by a network of orbital defense platforms.”
“If they did detect us,” Colbert continues, “we would’ve blown out of the sky even before establishing orbit.”
“The distress call should’ve been received by now,” Rashid reading some fleet movement data. “There is a small Rukantee fleet about forty minutes away by warp. They should’ve arrived by now. What exactly was in that distress message?”
The message read:
Phantoms. We discovered a Phantom temple. There are no Kintalio artifacts. Send reinforcement immediately.
So this is an archeological research station, but where is the dig site? The Kintalio is the Rukantee’s gods. They are actually an ancient species that went extinct over half a million years ago. I miss them, they are quite charming.
“They were looking for artifacts of their gods,” Rashid says, “but what are these Phantoms? I’ve never heard of them.”
“I’ve never learned about any Phantom in hostile anthropology and culture classes,” Colbert says.
“Hold on, let me trace the messages.” Michelina explains. “That fleet received the message. According to the logs, a coded message was sent back from the Rukantee parliament and related back here indicating the entire planet is now under code Kauchrak strategic alert and a specialists team is being sent to contain the situation.”
“What is code Kauchrak?” Caracara asks.
“I don’t know, I have never heard of it,” Colbert replies.
“Kauchrak is,” Michelina explains, “the eighty-sixth letter of the second most uncommon Rukantee language alphabet. It is possible that it is already a dead language. What it means in this context is unknown to me.”
“How do you know this?” Colbert asks.
“I know all languages known to Us, even the dead ones and newly developed ones. I know everything and anything, well at least what Our database know.”

“If you want to know more about her, you can ask after the mission. For now, just focus on the mission,” Rashid says in an annoyed way. “Spearhead to all, our new objective is focusing on ancient artifacts. We have to be careful. The Rukantee are on alert because they found something. The bodies Hearts and M.A.C. found are probably caused by what they found. BE ON ALERT!”

The team all says yes sir in some way or form and continues with their objectives.

“Ancient artifacts running amok, doesn’t this look like a plot to a Star Trek episode?” Ed says to himself.

It shouldn’t be surprising, many science fiction and fantasy writers used to work for Us.

After hours of sneaking and dodging patrol groups through corridor after corridor but not finding anything significant in the underground levels, Ed and Kokoro are finally nearing their rally point at the lowest point in the base.

Kokoro pokes her head around a corner to a long corridor and pops back in.

“Niisama,” Kokoro says worriedly and takes out a throwing stun knife. Put that away girl, this is a non-lethal mission.

“Yes, Butterfly?” Ed replies.

“I think a Rukantee guard just noticed me.” The imposing shadow of the large Rukantee carefully walks towards her.

“I don’t sense anything nearby but you.” Ed says with his rifle out at the read. “But do put a neural-electric round to the head if anything happens.”

She slides one of her finger mounted with a tiny camera on it around the corner. The shadow keeps walking towards Kokoro, now it is at the ready with a weapon.

“I can’t make a shot like that. I am keeping with my sticky shockers,” Kokoro loads a sticky shocker round into a grenade launcher pistol.
Kokoro reveals herself from her corners, aims, and pulls the trigger.

(\textit{Click})

Nothing happens, the trigger jams.

\textbf{\textgreater \textgreater Alert! }\textless \textless

\textbf{\textgreater \textgreater Friendly Fire Prevention System: “Do not shoot at fellow Employees.”} \textless \textless

Kokoro have mistaken Ed for a Rukantee guard. Lucky for him Our guns are connected to their suit’s computer.

Ed pretends to wipes sweat off of his helmet covered forehead and nervously laughs, “Ha ha ha!”

“Good thing we have the F.F.P.S.” Kokoro puts her gun away and also nervously laughs.

“Yeah,” Ed walks towards Kokoro. “At least our suits are also protective against a few shots of non-lethal rounds.”

“Uh-huh.” Kokoro points, “The map says this way.”

They walk into a lightless corridor. There is hardly any ambient light, all but complete darkness, beside the light at the start of the tunnel from where they came from. Kokoro activates her night vision camera to help her see. Ed uses his Psych vision in conjunction with his night vision. They stop in front of a reinforced titanium door with scraped off paint standing in their way.

“Goddess,” Ed plugs into the door console, “Open sesame.”

“I am unfamiliar with this colloquial phrase. I will assume you want me to unlock this door,” Michlina replies.

“Please and thank you.”

Michlina hacks away as she did before.

…

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Kokoro sits and leans against an adjacent wall, “This is taking longer than usual.”

“I doing this at my fastest possible speed. This door has more security measures than the previous doors I hacked into. Whatever is behind this door must be important.”

“Can you open it?” Ed patiently asks.
“No,” disappointingly says like a child being told she can’t have any candy.
“That’s surprising, why not?”
“Scan the door for me.”

Ed places his hand on the door and the scanner on his glove takes care of the rest. There are sensors on the door lock independent of the locking mechanisms which are linked to several other alarm systems. This will provide a good challenge for Michelina.

“I’ll open up the lock panel and hook up the wires.”
“NO!” Michelina yells.
“My ears!”

“Sorry. Every component is alarmed, including the panel covering the inner working of the door mechanism. I am unable to hack this system remotely.” Well, that’s disappointing.

“That’s alright, we’ll look at the map and find another way,” Kokoro opens her map in her visor.

“Understood, but do be careful. You can attempt to find another way of entry but I do not think there are any other means of infiltrating that particular area.” If you can see inside her helmet, you’ll find Michelina with a frustrated look.

“We’re not going to give up that easily,” Ed says. “If you find a way, let us know.”

“Of course.” Michelina shuts off her com and pouts.
“What do we do now?” Kokoro asks.

“Spearhead,” Ed says over the com. “We can’t find any other way into the only locked door for the lowest levels, please advise.”

“Head towards the southern entrance and scout out an exit path,” Rashid orders. “I’ll get M.A.C. over, maybe he’ll have better luck with it.”

“Aye sir,” Ed replies and heads back up with Kokoro.
Back on Earth, the sermon ends, but church isn’t over for Ed and his family. There is volunteer planning for the parents and Sunday school for Ed and his siblings.

“I don’t want to go to Sunday school,” Ellen grumbles. “Just like church it is boring and worst of all, we have to say things they want us to say.”

“But it is interactive learning, much more fun than the sermon and what high school is going to be like,” Elizabeth pretending to be a teacher with a deep voice.

“High school has obnoxious teachers and you can mess around with friends. Why aren’t you complaining Eddy?” Ellen asks.

“I’ve been in Sunday school longer than you two have,” Ed replies. “I’ve given up on complaining.”

Ed might not care for Sunday school, but he is a bit anxious to get out so he can spend some time with Lisa. His usual calm demeanor is hiding it.

“Whatever, but I don’t like this new Mr. Anderson,” Ellen says about their new Sunday school teacher. “He carries this creepy smile and he is too well dressed for someone who deals with kids. He is a bit passive aggressive too.”

“He’s just volunteering. From what I’ve heard, he works with this religious book publisher.”

“Still, what person in his right mind would wear an expensive wind-up diamond watch and a silk tie around kids? That’s just a disaster waiting to happen.”

“If it happens then it’s his fault for bringing expensive things when dealing with kids.”

The three Alfred kids, all being very smart, quit talking about this as they get closer to the church’s Sunday school classroom.

The three takes their seats in the colorful room with ample amount cute whimsical Biblical drawings on the wall. There is a cartoon Noah on an adorable ark with all the animals. A cartoon Moses is parting the Red Sea. Of course there is also a cartoon Jesus. Ed stands out in this room. He is one of two teenager in the room among twenty some preteens and children.
Mr. Anderson, a tall blond gentleman finely dressed in a tailored suit and diamond incrusted watch, is the Sunday school teacher. He walks into the church’s activity room and stands in front of a chalkboard with an intimidating stance.

“Hell,” he says with intimidation and pauses to look into everyone’s eyes, “That is what we are going to talk about today and how we can avoid being punished into that eternal damnation and suffering.”

The three Alfred kids roll their eyes.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 03:33 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 12, 2010. 10:33 am Central Standard Time =
Fifth planet of CXT-12834 System

On the planet with green sky, Faustine and Michelina is observing the situation on a gentle hill miles away from a hostile base.

“If this Phantom thing makes the Rukantee shiver in fear, then why are we looking for it?” Faustine asks. “It would be much worst for us.”

Michelina stands up and looks at the base.

“Because,” Michelina steps forward, “whatever they discovered could give us an advantage on the battles to come.”

In the last fifty years, We lost a strip of space four by seven by twenty three light years wide to the Rukantee. If they take more, they might be able to figure out where Earth is, so we need everything we can for an upper hand.

“Where are you going?” Faustine hears Michelina’s footsteps.

“To open that door,” and runs off towards a dark horizon for the speckles of light coming from the base.

“STOP!!” Faustine screams and puts her left hand over her left ear, “Spearhead, sir, Goddess has run off towards the base. She says she is going to open the locked door that Guide Light and Butterfly found.”

Crap… What the hell is she doing!
“Damn it!” Rashid replies. “Goddess, go back to your position now!”

“I am the only person who can open that door. We need to know what is behind it and how we can use it to our advantage.”

She has always been obedient. She took the assignment to the Night Hawk without question but now this?

“We will find another way,” Rashid says while crawling in another maintenance tube. “Go back to your position. That is an order.”

“With all due respect sir, if whatever the Rukantee discovered can make them this nervous, we can surely utilize this discovery to push them back a few sectors. An artifact like this is of utmost strategic value.”

“I know, but this is too risky for you. Stop now!”

“Sorry, sir. I am going in.” Why is she being rebellious now? Can’t she wait till she’s a teenager like everyone else?

“Far Seer, you have my permission to use non-lethal rounds to take her down.”

>> Friendly Fire Prevention System is deactivated for non-lethal attacks. <<

“Sir?” Michelina looks back towards Faustine as she run.

“Yes, I gave the order,” Rashid replies. “Turn around now.”

“I can hear her on my scope,” Faustine aims.

“Take the shot,” Rashid orders.

Faustine, lying on the grassy hill, is listening to the black and white sonar outline image from her scope. She takes in and holds her breath. Her rifle sight lines up with Michelina’s back.

“Please stop Goddess,” Faustine says. “I’m about to shoot you in the back.”

Michelina doesn’t reply so Faustine slowly squeeze the trigger.

A silenced whoosh sound, not a loud bang, emits from the gun. Michelina spins around without deviating from her path and not a second after, a tiny blue mist glows with electric sparks appears as the stun round misses its target and hits the ground.

“Sir, I missed,” Faustine reports in a slightly surprised tone. She rarely misses. She was able to get a head shot from five miles
away by predicting her target’s movement. She once shot a ship in orbit from the ground.

“That is a first,” Rashid disappointed by the result, “unload an entire mag if you have to.”

“Yes sir,” Faustine fires again.

Michelina ducks at the last possible moment before the round can hit her.

“I missed… again…”

Faustine takes another shot again.

Michelina side steps and the round miss her.

Again.

She does a back flip and the round, again, misses her.

Last round of the clip is unloaded.

Michelina dodges every stun round with the gracefulness of a figure skater.

Faustine’s jaw drops. “I can’t hear her anymore.”

“She is too good,” Rashid says, “Tomorrow, track her.”

“I can’t,” Colbert responses. She frantically swipes around her map to look for Michelina. “She’s gone.”

“How?”

Colbert analyze the moment when she lost Michelina. “She is probably using alchemy to manipulate air to counter your sonar wave and she has cloaking Ability so she’s hidden from Tomorrow’s sensors.”

Faustine stands up and tries to listen for Michelina “That child needs to learn how to behave.”

I agree with her.

Oh, I’m dreading the court martial already. I have to go through so many loopholes to make sure Michelina will stay on the team. I can’t let her off the team, I will not allow it.

“Be advised, Goddess went against order and is heading to the locked door,” Rashid announces to his annoyance.

“You got to be kidding me,” Ed says.

“I wish I was,” Rashid sighs. “You have my explicit permission to shoot her on site with non-lethal rounds. The F.F.P.S. for non-lethal attacks on her armor is turned off.”
“Should we head back to the locked door and wait for her?” Ed asks.

“No, you two are already too far from it, just carry out your orders. We may need a secured extraction point.” That is a tactical mistake. Ed is the only one who can sense her. There is no way Michelina can hide her brain pattern from Ed.

“Yes sir,” Ed and Kokoro reply.

Rashid calls for Erasto and Leilah over the com and gives them new order to the locked door and intercept Michelina. Of course Leilah would love to stay in the warehouse to study the dead bodies for a while longer, but orders are orders. However, I get the feeling that she is getting more and more irritated. There are large number of Rukantee patrols standing between them and their destination, but she is not allowed to harm any of them.

Rashid and Caracara crawl into the main computer core of the base after bypassing several security layers. The core is a glowing green crystalline structure the size of a bus. Rashid finds an out-of-the-way terminal and plugs in. “Michelina, if you can hear me, I need help hacking into this.”

A message pops up in Rashid’s visor:

If you think you can track me via a communication link, you are mistaken. I imbedded this message in your suit’s system with trigger phrases set up so it will open when you need it. The attached program will take thirty seconds to initiate and will grant you access to almost any system for five minutes at a time. You MUST disconnect before the time runs out or the alarm may be triggered. However, you can reconnect as many times as necessary.

“Damn that kid…..” Rashid initiates the program.

Michelina arrives in front of the locked door. Her various abilities allow her to infiltrate from the ground level to down here, deep underground with heavy interior fortification, in less than twenty minutes. She opens her arms and hugs the large locked
door. Michelina starts to connect to the door with her brain via her suit’s computer. One of Michelina’s abilities is Mental Electronic Interface which allows her to interface with electronic devices using the electro-magnetic field produced by her brain and body. One door bolt slides open. Another one follows.

Rashid annoyingly unplugs the wire connecting his suit to a computer terminal. This is his fifth time for him to disconnect and he still can’t hack through the security. Caracara can’t help because he is on lookout duty. Their suits have motion sensors but it can’t tell everything around them.

Sounds of footsteps echoes close by. Caracara taps Rashid on the shoulder. The two jumps over the railing and down a level. Rashid quickly plugs into another terminal and tries to get into the main system again.

“All the bolts are unlocked, but why is this door not opening? Welded shut? Software locked out? Manually disconnected?” Michelina asks herself. “I must diagnose what is preventing me from opening this door from the inside but I must redirect the internal alarm first.”

She looks at the door, and grabs a few wires from her shoulder pouch. Then she attaches them to an access panel, redirects the alarm sensor currents to the wires, and cuts the current to the access panel. With just a few bolts unscrewed the metallic access panel comes off. With an opening the size of her head in the door, she looks into the interior of the door, and finds a few wires for the lock not just cut, but partially removed, “The power to the hydraulic system is manually disconnected. I must fix it.”

Rashid hooks his suit up to a terminal once again, “I wish I could just Google this Phantom thing.”

“Aren’t you using a search engine right now?”

“I mean Googling is easy. This is not.”

Even with the support team and a mediocre A.I. helping them from Tomorrow, sipping through trillions of files for anything relevant still takes a very long time. A third of the files are songs
and music. The Rukantee has a very musical culture. These are even everyday conversation, these are just for entertainment sake.

Michelina takes some wires which are connected to the display panel and uses them as replacement wires to connect them to the crystalline circuit panels of the hydraulic system on the lock and the computer.

“Finish!” She says as she complete the repair work on the door mechanism.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 04:09 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 12, 2010. 11:09 am Central Standard Time =

“We’ve heard everyone but you Edward,” Mr. Anderson says, “Do you have anything you want to share about how we can avoid eternal damnation in hell?”

It is nearing the end of Sunday school for Ed and talking about the place he thinks he’ll eventually end up isn’t the best topic he would like to talk about. Besides, he’s the last person to talk, all the possible things he can say has been said. Be nice, pray every night, don’t listen to metal, Ed just can’t think of anything else that can appease Mr. Anderson.

“Why should I care about the afterlife when I have this life to worry about?” Ed honestly replies with discontent.

“Of course you should care. Do you want to be damned into eternal suffering?” Mr. Anderson rebuts.

“What you are preaching right now is to do good because hell waits if you don’t, yet you don’t talk about how we should do good for the sake of doing good. What about helping thy neighbor, what about improving humanity, and how about doing good to remove the hell that exists right here in our world.”

“No hell exists in this world. There may be entrances to hell, but hell is in a separate realm than God’s Earth.” One of Mr. Anderson’s eyebrow is starting to tick.
“God didn’t intend on hell appearing here, but then the apple was bitten. Now there is hell in many places. We are fortunate enough to not experience it.”

“You are wrong and I am right, Mr. Alfred, I am always right,” Mr. Anderson is raising his voice but keeping calm. “Hell doesn’t exist here! And if you believe otherwise, you may be going there.”

“Then explain to me war, poverty, and famine. There are personal hells that people get dragged into from obsession with self image, drugs, or abusive relationship. There are people in other countries that are dragged into slavery and labor.”

“God punishes those who had sinned. It’s not hell that they are experiencing. They are just getting a tiny taste of hell would be like as a chance for redemption.”

“What did a child ever do that deserved to be forced into mining diamonds that is on your designer watch?” Ed’s voice is getting more aggressive but still timid. This Mr. Anderson is really talented. It is very difficult to make Ed angry on Earth.

“They didn’t accept God, instead they chose to participate in their pagan rituals and believe in their so called gods and demons. Those sinners deserve to serve us true believers.”

Mmm… I did a little digging and it turns out the diamonds on this Anderson’s watch are blood diamonds. And will you look at this… The world is small. The thirteen year old who mined a few of the stones is an Employee working in the Science Department.

“You must stop arguing against me Mr. Alfred,” Mr. Anderson calmly says. “You must show me some respect. My words are God’s words.”

Ed shrinks down a little.

“Respect is earned Mr. Anderson,” Ed quietly says, fighting his usual timid tendency which he doesn’t have when he’s off planet.

“What did you say?”

“Respect is earned and your words cannot God’s words. How can you a mere young mortal understand even a tiny part His infinite wisdom?”

“You will go to Hell if you don’t stop disagreeing with me.”

“What about wars and genocides?” Ed asks. “These are hell.”

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115
Rashid is watching a video he found in the computer core. “Shit shit shit!” Rashid yells inside his helmet after seeing the screaming and the blood. “You okay there sir?” Caracara asks. “No! We have to stop her.”

“Battlefields are hell,” Ed continues. “The trenches of France were the most terrible. What about the beaches of Normandy, where young men, most of them were Christians, ran forth onto the beaches of hell.”

Michelina pushes on the keypad one button at a time to input the command to open the door.

Beep
Beep
Beep
She slowly presses the last button.

The door creeks open as slither of yellow light cast out from the other side of the door. She puts her arms on her waist in a triumphant stand.

“What about those children in African forced to become child soldiers or sold as sex slaves in the name of our Christian God?”

Rashid disconnect and talks on the com, “Goddess, don’t open the door. No matter what, don’t open it. I wish you can hear this. I repeat DO NOT open the door!”
“Too late,” Michelina replies as a yellow glow shines on her armor, “I entered the command code to open the door two seconds before you establish contact with me.”

“What about the hell our soldiers are going through right now in the deserts of Iraq and the valleys of Afghanistan?”


“How about the hell civilians faced during World War II? Whole families were rounded up and shipped off to camps. They didn’t know what was waiting for behind those doors to the showers. They didn’t know they are going to suffer behind those doors.”

“The Phantom,” Rashid quickly says, “is to be considered a Priority Omega…..”

“AAHHHHHH!!!!!” Gun fires and Michelina scream across the com. “They…. Every…. re…..”

“You are breaking up! Retreat!” “H e l l p . . .” Static . . . Silent. . .

Dead silence…

Drip
Drip
Smear
These are blood.
Michelina’s blood.
Pool of fresh crimson red blood.
The corridor is illuminated with the ominous yellow glow coming from the once locked door. A pool of smeared blood drenches on the spot in front of the door where Michelina once stood with her own mini victory celebration.
The girl is too smart for her own good. I don’t want to lose her. She is too valuable. Maybe I over estimated her. Maybe she is not ready for this.
Chapter Four: The Locked Door
Sunday school is finally over and the Alfred family is leaving for lunch. The kids run down staircase to freedom in front of the church with such excitement that only Christmas morning can rival. Mr. Anderson slowly walks out from the church and gazes down on the Alfred children with scornfully fire in his eyes.

“Jack,” Mr. Anderson shouts to stop Ed’s dad from leaving.

“Go start the car Eliza,” Ed’s dad throws the car key to Ed’s mom and she catches it without looking. He stops in the arch of the church’s main door for Mr. Anderson.

“Your son has something evil in him,” Mr. Anderson suddenly says.

“Excuse me?” Ed’s dad scrunches up his eye brows in confusion.

“Your son said Hell exists on Earth and is all around us. This obviously means one thing, he worships the devil and wishes for the end to come.”

“I’m sure it is some miscommunications. You know how kids are, they are. They don’t how to get their points across.” Ed’s dad says with a friendly tone.

“Look Jack, he talked back against me, he must worship the devil. There are no other explanation.”

“He talked back, so what? He’s a fifteen-year-old. What do you expect? What teenager doesn’t talk back?”

“Good God fearing children who knows their place. Your son is evil and a Satan worshiper. Your son’s act of disrespect will stray my herd.” The veins in Mr. Anderson’s forehead are pulsing with anger. “You better teach him how to treat the men of God. I am His words.”

“Or what, Anderson?” Ed’s dad yells. “Look, I’m trying to be civil here. Calm yourself down. You are over reacting.” He turns
around and walks down the white concrete staircase in front of the church.

“Don’t you walk away!” Mr. Anderson yells from top of the staircase so loudly that his voice is scratched up and everyone is looking at him, “My words are the words of God and walking away from me is walking towards Satan!”

Ed’s dad gets in the car and slams the car door, “What do you kids want for lunch?”

“What was all that yelling?” Ed’s mom asks.
“We’ll talk about it later, so where to?”
“IHOP!” Ellen yells.
“Waffle House!” Ed says.
“Chuck E. Cheese’s!” Elizabeth screams.
“We are not going to Chuck E. Cheese’s in our Sunday’s best. Bob Evan’s it is,” Ed’s mom says with a motherly laughter.
“Good idea sweetie!” Ed’s dad says as he pulls the van out of the church’s parking lot.

After a short drive, the Alfred family is inside a big red building that is Bob Evan’s. Warm colors filled the building along with pictures of their town in the nineteenth century hanged on the wall.

They are eating breakfast food. Maple syrups are dripping on to piles and piles of pancake. Every plate has bacon strip and more bacon strip and more bacon strip on it. Mmmm, I want some bacon strips, too bad I can’t eat.

“Kids,” Ed’s father says after swallowing a bite of sandwich. “I don’t want you to go to Sunday school anymore.”
“Praise the Lord!” Ellen raises her hands while a strip of bacon is still hanging out from her mouth.
Their mother gives her a disapproving look.
“Dad, that’s a sudden change of heart,” Ed replies.
“Why is that sweetie?” Ed’s mom asks her husband.
“The yelling from earlier, Mr. Anderson screamed some strange things to me,” he takes a bite of his sandwich. “He is way
too fanatical and I don’t want you kids learning from him anymore.”

“What did he say sweetie?”

Ed’s dad explains the situation. He’s a bit angry too.

“Really, he said all that?” Ed raises one of his eyebrows.

“It sounded like you two had differences of opinion, but he took it to an extreme.” Ed’s dad concerns, “Ed, you don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“How did this happen?” Ed’s mom asks.

“Ed stood up to the man,” Ellen proudly announces.

“I disagree on what he was preaching. He said we must do good to avoid Hell. I said we should do good for the sake of helping others. He then said I am wrong because he thinks I want Hell on Earth.”

“Okay, I don’t want you going to Sunday school anymore if you feel uncomfortable,” Ed’s mom says.

“I’ll still go. He can’t be any more annoying than he already is,” Ed replies as he continues to eat his omelet. I doubt his little incident with his Sunday school teacher is on his mind. It is all Lisa. In a few hours he’ll be able to make an attempt to ask her out.

“Don’t worry, I’ve sent a recording of what he said to the pastor,” Ellen says with another mouthful of bacon. “I doubt Anderson will step into this church again.”

“You had your phone on in church?” Ed’s mom scolds.

“What, it was appropriate.” Ellen has the same sense of deduction and espionage as her great-grandmother who was in the Office of Strategic Service, the precursor of the CIA, during World War Two.

“I guess you had a good reason, but run it by me when it comes to something like that. It can land you in real deep troubles.”

Compared to most parents, Ed’s mom and dad trust their kids’ independence and decision more, for which I am glad for. If Mr. Anderson’s hostility happened to another family, the parents would forbid the kids from going to Sunday school instead of letting them decide. Their effort in raising Ed into an independent person is also greatly welcomed on our end. He’ll make a good leader someday.
The comm. stays silent after Michelina’s last transmission. “M.A.C., Hearts, stay where you are.” Rashid breaks the silence, “Guide Light and Butterfly will head back and give you two some back up.”

“What is going on?” Ed asks.

“We tracked her for a few seconds,” Colbert informs them. “She is heading deeper into the lower level. We can’t see her exact path because her signal is sporadically disappearing. Her vitals are in serious condition, she has lost a lot of blood. It doesn’t look like she is conscience. I don’t know if this is errors in her vital transmission or not but we aren’t detecting her left arm at all.”

“Tomorrow, I am uploading all the data I have on these Phantom things,” Rashid says.

The entire support team is frantically analyzing the data. The comm. channel is going crazy. The team is asking what’s going, people on the Queen is asking what’s going on, and the support team on board Tomorrow is asking what’s going on.

Ed is suppressing his panic as he and Kokoro heads back towards the once locked door.

“There was more than one from the start.” Colbert explains, “What the Rukantee discovered and locked away are organisms that reproduce by spreading a virus or a spore into its victims. It turns their victims into them.”

“Damn it,” Erasto says. “I was hoping this was just a toxic leak or something.”

“Is this like the Tardarous Virus all over again. Is it that? Did they stumble upon one of his lab?” Ed frightfully asks. The Tardarous Virus is the reason why Ed hates zombies. It is the manmade virus of an interstellarly wanted war criminal that had killed over six billion sentient beings.

“No, it takes hours for zombification to happen,” Dr. Vergara, the support teams’ medical officer, adds in with his Chilean accent. “The infestation here takes only a few seconds.”
Even with Ed’s fright against zombies, I guess he would rather face a horde of zombies than a horde of Phantoms.

“This should be considered a Priority Omega Biohazard outbreak,” Rashid says. Omega is the worst of the worst priority. Anthrax and SARS are common cold compared to a Priority Omega outbreak.

Colbert and her team are analyzing as fast as they can.

“Doctor,” Ed calls up.

“Yes Guide Light?” Dr. Vergara answers.

“Can you do me a favor and not refer to any victim of biological attacks as zombies from now on?” Ed asks. He hates the Z word. It is derogatory towards the victims, but the victims don’t even have to brain function to understand language.

“I read your report on that mission kid,” Dr. Vergara says. “I won’t pretend I understand how you feel but I’ll listen to you.”

“Thank you sir.”

They found a security footage and relay it down to the team.

On their visor, they watch the video of a group of Rukantee guards being chased down by these Phantoms. The yellow wild beasts are covered in horns and thorns. Rabies ravaged animals is tamed compared to these Phantoms. The slowest of the group of guards was tackled and bitten. One of its comrades shot off the attacking beast and carried the wounded guard into cover around a corner as the others kept up their suppression fire.

Sitting behind cover, the wounded Rukantee guard violently shivered, like it is having a seizure. It started panting heavily as it tries to breath. Its skin changed starting from the open wound and spreads throughout its body from the natural Rukantee dull blue to bright slimy yellow. It mutated, extra arms busted out of the prison that is its ribcage, and teeth fell out and new sharpen teeth grew from its jaws, all within seconds. It didn’t wait, it didn’t stalk, it sprung towards the guards from behind. The cycle continued with more soldier mutated and attacked their comrades.

These Phantoms… I remember them. I haven’t seen them for a very long time.

“These things are like the Flood. They are fast!” Caracara comments.
“Is that why the Rukantee are at full alert?” Kokoro asks.
“Yes this is,” Rashid answers.
“Why don’t we leave that kid here to rot?” Leilah asks.
“What?” Faustine yells across the com.
“Ow, my ears. If the infestation is so aggressive, then why are we not ditching her and getting the hell out of here? She is probably one of them by now.”
“Goddess’ vital is still human,” Dr. Vergara reports.
“If we can’t get her back, we will have to consider the Final Protocol,” Erasto says.
“What?” Ed furiously rejects.
Rashid cuts in, but he agrees with Erasto.
“We can’t do this!”
“There is no other way.” “How can we be that cruel?” “I’ll enjoy killing her myself.” “Shut up!”

With the chaos and the newfound stress, the noisy comm. now turns into an angry comm.. Everyone is yelling over each on the issue of Final Protocol.
So, what is Final Protocol?
It is a regulation that state if an Employee has been captured by hostile forces and any attempt of rescue is near impossible, then we will have to make sure the captured Employee is killed and brain destroy so no information can be extracted. That is a cruel reality. We have to safeguard Earth, even if we have to kill one of our own to do so. That’s the Final Protocol. We don’t leave anyone behind… alive.
“EVERYONE!!! Quite!” Rashid yells, “No one has died under my command before. I don’t care if Renatus can get her back afterward, I am not letting her die without trying anything else first. We have to go in and try to rescue her, is that understood?”
Everyone replies yet.

The Renatus, Born Again, one of the divisions that hardly ever get called to duty and everyone hopes they never get any work. The only job Renatus is to bring dead Employee back to life, usually with a new cloned body. Not all cause of death allows for revival and it takes enormous amount of energy to do so. If the
person cannot be revived within forty-eight hours of death, they cannot be revived at all because the energy needs skyrocket with time. Thanks to this department, We haven’t suffer a permanent death for the last thirteen years.

}} ALERT! KETNA ALERT INITIATED {{
}} ALL PERSONAL TO ARMS {{

The base alarm goes off as every corridor in the facility lights up with flashing green lights. Teams of guards run off in full alert to set up barricades and defensive parameters in certain corridors. Even some of the less well trained office workers from the offices up above are preparing to fend off the scourge as well.

“Our jobs just got harder,” Kokoro says as she and Ed crawl back to the lower levels.

The base is now at full alert. Stealth is now an expensive luxury.

“Just stick with crawling in these maintenance tubes. We’ll be fine.” Ed looks back as he crawls in front of Kokoro.

Light years away, onboard Wisdom of the Queen, orbiting the neutral planet of Lisona, Hayley is standing in front of her strategic table. She is running some simulation of what might happen if the situation is kept untamed. All the possible outcomes are not looking very good. The slowest scenario will have the Phantom spreading to Earth in a year. The fastest is a month, if Earth is unlucky enough to have an infected ship traveling randomly at warp.

“This kind of situation is really bad,” she contacts Colbert.

“I know madam,” Colbert analyzing the video footage frame by frame.

“I need a detail scan of these things,” Hayley commands.

“How detailed, Madam?”

“I might be paranoid but I want the scan down to the quark level. I want to know what these things are made of, how these things grow, and how these can be killed.”

She’s not paranoid. Scanning down the little component that makes up sub-atomic partials is being careful. Space is infinite and
we need this kind of information just in case if there are undiscovered threats are hiding in that level.

“The team’s equipments can only scan down to compound and molecular level. They can’t scan down to the quark.”

“Then get them something that they can use,” Hayley orders.

“I will have to beam them down and the Rukantee will probably detect the matter stream.”

“The Rukantee have bigger problems to deal with. We need to have a way to defend against them but I hope what I am ordering will just be a wasted effort and never needed.”

“Yes madam.”

Hayley falls onto her command chair in the middle of the bridge. Her right arm is up and supporting her head. She sighs…

Hayley has battlefield command and combat experience but she is only a military general, not a medical one. She isn’t trained in this kind of situation. However, I have faith in her. She usually can pull off incredible feats under pressure.

Colbert switches the comlink and relays the team their new objectives.

Rashid, of course, shares the same concerns as did Colbert about being detected by the Rukantee and objected. But what can he do, he’s just a colonel and Hayley refute his objection. So, one of the support team places seven sub-sub-atomic scanners onto a teleportation pad and Colber beams them down directly onto the back pouch on the team’s armor.

Elsewhere in the Rukantee compound, Leilah and Erasto are heading back towards the once locked door. Rukantee guards are everywhere. They have to crawl above sets of lights hanging off the ceiling to avoid detection.

“They want us to scan one of these things?” Leilah asks. “And down to a thousand times smaller than an atom?”

“Yeah… They say how dangerous they are, now they want us to scan one,” Erasto agrees.

“Remind me how close we need to get for a scan?”

The sounds of distance weapons fire echo the corridor.
“At least five centimeters and we have to keep it stationary for ten seconds.”

Now the sounds of frantically running footsteps approach them ever so quickly.

“Sounds thrilling,” Leilah says with slight sarcasm. “Now how are we supposed to get close enough to scan one of these things?”

A group of guards run towards their position, shooting at the opposite direction as they run. A few Phantoms is feverously chasing them like a pack of wolves chasing rabbits. My walking talking battery, Erasto, looks down and electrifies himself and direct the current down to the Phantoms. The monstrous beasts shake as if they have seizure. He stops the current as those things flops to the ground.

“That is how we are going to scan them.”

“Nice plan, we just have to wait for the guards to move on.” Leilah clutches her fists, “I wish I am allowed to kill those guards and get this over with.”

“Would you calm down? The shock didn’t kill the things.” They need to scan them quickly. The Phantoms are already starting to recover.

“Why didn’t you?” Leilah lays down on top the lights fixtures.

“To get a good scan, I have to keep at least one of them alive.”

“And then kill them afterward?”

“Exactly,” Erasto lifts his right hand up and point up.

“You do that.”

“I thought you would like to kill something before this mission ends.”

Leilah yawns, “Those things are too dumb, there is no point for me to kill things that aren’t aware of themselves, can’t regrets, or know how to beg for mercy.”

Erasto looks down, “Oh shit.”

“What?”

The group of guards, oblivious to how their lives were saved, moves to the unconscious Phantoms and one of them places a blue cylinder in the middle of the bodies. It start to flash green colored light.
Erasto waves his arms forward frantically and crawls on the light fixture as if he is a monkey in a jungle. Leilah gets the signal and speeds off with him.

The group of guards runs in the opposite direction as the lights on the blue cylinder flashes faster and faster. They turn and take cover around a corner. Erasto and Leilah continues crawl away. Leilah is so fast, her movement looks almost like a cheetah.

The flashing light stops and a blue glow illuminates the entire corridor. They look back with their polarized visors as the illumination, almost as bright as the sun, even the corridor in front of them is washed out with light. Steel is melting behind them from the heat of the plasma bomb.

Ten seconds later, the light dies down. Erasto drops down to the floor with drips of the metal light fixture melted onto his armor. Leilah joins him and walk to the epicenter of the bomb. He looks at the ground and up the wall seeing no trace of those Phantoms. That section of the corridor is a puddle of melted metal pudding to the core of the meter thick wall. Erasto sighs, “So much for scanning these things.”

“Kind of funny how our most feared enemy is so afraid of these things,” Leilah stands on her tippy toe, stretches her back, and bends down with her butt pointing up as she inspects the damage. Drops of liquid metal are still dripping from what used to be the ceiling.

In another part of the base, Ed and Kokoro reach a hub from the maintenance tube that they had visited before. There, a door leads to the corridor where Kokoro almost shot Ed. Ed cracks the door open by a millimeter or two and sticks out a fiber optic camera the width of a string. Nothing. Soulless, breathless, and soundless. They slip out of the door into the empty corridor. Suddenly, Ed pulls out his rifle and points it at the end of the hallway. Kokoro pulls her rarely used pistol out and points towards the same place.

A lone Rukantee casts a silhouette from the end of the corridor. It hasn’t noticed them yet.
Ed should be sensing this Rukantee but he is surprised. I have to look at the mission log after this is all finished to make sure that Ed is simply too stressed out to notice it and not the Rukantee has develop some sort of brainwave shielding technologies.

“Are any other way to that door?” Kokoro asks.

“This is the fastest way down to there. Besides, it’s alone, we can take it,” Ed replies.

“I can’t see him on my sensors,” Kokoro switching between the different visor vision modes.

“Thermal-electric shielded suit. I have never seen them using these things before.”

The two slowly creeps forward. They know their non-lethal rounds are useless against that Rukantee’s suit which is technologically somewhat similar to what they are wearing. But that shouldn’t matter. Two of my pride and joy versus one of them in close quarter combat is not a fair fight at all, for that Rukantee. I say one of mine, especially someone like Ed, versus ten of them counts as them getting outnumbered, he just doesn’t know he is this skilled yet.

That one lone Rukantee is no ordinary soldier, just like my two children who are about to fight it. It is a covert operation soldier, a really rare sight. They can’t see its eyes. It stands imposingly tall at six foot five, almost like it is standing casually, instead of standing with its back bent down and at attention like a normal Rukantee soldier. It is wearing a helmet and a completely sealed suit, just as mysterious as our suits on a stealthy scale.

It slowly turns around and looks at Ed and Kokoro. Kokoro swallows in nervousness. The two inch forward and Kokoro takes out a stun blade. That Rukantee puts its left hand on a plasma pistol holstered to his right forearm, but disengages all of a sudden and hugs the wall.

“What the hell?” Ed asks and inches even closer.

That Rukantee sweeps his hand towards the wall, signaling Ed and Kokoro to do the same.

“I think it wants us to hug the wall as well…” Kokoro says curiously.

Red dot…
A red dot bumps up on the motion sensor displayed on his visor.

Another one.
And another one.

Red dots are sprouting up everywhere in front of them on sensor and scrabbling towards them very fast.

“We should do what it is suggesting. I am reading multiple movements coming from the end of this corridor.”

The two hug the wall and a small horde of Phantoms rushes through corridor. Ed and Kokoro are breathing faster. The Rukantee looks towards the two and stays perfectly still. Ed commands his suit to tense up, preventing him to move. Kokoro follows him and does the same thing.

A horde of Phantoms passes, but three of them from the back of the pack stop and turn to Ed and Kokoro. Their heart beat quickens and sweating in their suits. There is no time to activate their holo-optic camouflages so they must rely on something else to survive.

The three Phantoms slowly walk, with all six feet, towards them. Drools drips from their many fangs sticking out of their hideously mutated face which barely resemble a Rukantee which they once were. The only artifacts of their former existence are the damaged armors and ripped up clothing that clings to their bodies.

One of these things climbs on the wall with its head right in front of Ed’s face and looks at his face separated by the visor completely polarized into one-way mode. He stares down the monstrous eyes, and it stares at the black non-transparent surface of Ed’s visor. It sniffs Ed closely. His heart rate is rising. Its breath fogs up his helmet with every pulse of its breath. It loses interest and pops back down to the ground in all sixes and the three returns to the pack.

The lone Rukantee swiftly springs out from the wall and reaches for the large gun that is on its back. Ed and Kokoro rearm themselves and aim at that Rukantee. It shoots its weapon and so the two retaliate. Two spherical rounds of ammunition fly up and over Ed and Kokoro’s head, missing them completely, and bolts of neural-electric energy flies towards the lone Rukantee.
Ed and Kokoro’s head move with the overshot ammunitions, one eye tracks it and another aiming their weapons with the help of their weapons sights displayed on their visors. The lone Rukantee, nimbler than others of its kind, dodges the gunfire by doing a barrel row. The spherical ammunitions lands far behind Ed and Kokoro and continue to roll towards the Phantoms. The ammunitions stops right behind the Phantoms and dissolves into a bubble of bright white light, the monstrosities vaporizes as the bubble of light consumes them. Only the armors and clothing are left but nothing else of those creatures.

Uh? Anti-organic rounds? I didn’t know the Rukantee has them. This kind of ammunition creates burst of self-contained gamma ray that vaporizes any organic compound. We have them in stock but rarely use them because they are too overpowering. I guess it’s the same for the Rukantee.

Ed and Kokoro look back to the lone Rukantee. It puts its weapon back onto its back. The two still have the barrels of their guns aiming at it and it raises one of its hands and points at them. It then points down and quickly waves its hand back up.

“I think it is trying to tell us to leave,” Kokoro says curiously.

“I can see that. Why isn’t it trying to shoot us?” Ed asks.

My two children and the lone Rukantee keep staring at each other like a staring contest but not able to see into each other’s eyes. The lone Rukantee is probably on a mission that doesn’t involve Us, I guess that’s why it hasn’t attack them.

“Leave,” that Rukantee says via an open comm. channel and their suits’ computer translates.

Kokoro tilts her head.

“We can’t,” Ed replies with authority.

“Leave.”

“Why are you not shooting at us or calling for reinforcement?” Ed interrogates.

“You are not a priority, as you can tell. Leave now and never come back.”

“We will not.”
“Retreat. Go elsewhere in the cosmos and die another way,” the lone Rukantee turns his back and starts to walk away from Ed and Kokoro. “This is not a fate any being should suffer through.”

“Why should we listen to you?” Ed proceeds to follow it.

“Then you should make prayers to your gods for you are unlucky to not die under my ax.”

Kokoro follows as well.

In all my years, I have not seen the Rukantee to not attack known enemies in their territories. They are very merciful and follow strict rules of conduct when it comes to non-combatants, but obviously Ed and Kokoro is armed and dangerous.

Ed calls for Rashid.

“We’ve encountered a lone Rukantee. Its armor is unique, I’ve never seen it before,” Ed reports.

“So? Do you have to engage it? If so, then just do it quickly and hide the body,” Rashid replies slightly annoyed.

“We made contact. We engaged in a conversation together.”

“Strange,” Rashid is surprised.

“Yeah, me and Butterfly’s first time talking to one of them.”

“Why haven’t you two taken care of it yet?”

Ed explains their unusual situation to Rashid.

“That is odd behaviors. Let it be if it cooperates, just be on your guard for any sudden movement,” Rashid orders. “Over and out.”

“What are you doing here?” Kokoro cheerfully asks the lone Rukantee in attempt to sound friendly.

“Cleanse,” it replies without looking back. “Why are humans here?”

“We can’t tell you that.”

The lone Rukantee remains silence and seemingly ignoring Ed and Kokoro’s existence as it continues to move deeper and deeper into the complex with Ed and Kokoro behind him.

Leilah and Erasto are still crawling to the once locked door. Unfortunately, they keep encountering groups of Rukantee battling the Phantoms. Erasto recued a few groups of guards from the Phantoms with only a few of them seems to noticed something odd.
is going on but dismissed his assistance from the shadow as luck or damaged electrical connections. I don’t know if he is either merciful and is trying to spare the Rukantee from the terror that is turning into one of the Phantoms or tactical in trying to stop the increase in hostile numbers.

After every skirmish, the Rukantee meticulously incinerate the Phantoms’ bodies with plasma fire leaving nothing but a melted corridor section.

They turn at the corridor that goes to the elevator shaft to the lower level where the once locked door is located at. The corridor is unusually quiet with only mere echoes of battles coming from behind them compared to the small skirmishes they encountered earlier.

There is a small gentle tremble.

“Run back the way we came,” Erasto yells and turns around on the light fixture. “Don’t think just move.”

It is more apparent now as the corridor shakes in an earthquake.

Leilah quickly drops down to ground and runs. Erasto also drops to the ground and as his feet touches the ground, the corridor section behind him explodes. They run away as fast as they can but debris is raining down faster than they can run.

One final explosion flings a slab of titanium reinforced concrete wall towards them. Leilah summersaults to the side, dodging it, but Erasto is just a tad too slow and the piece of wall shatters on his back as it tackles him.

“Are you okay?” Leilah rush to Erasto fallen onto the ground.

Luckily, their armors harden and protect them from high velocity projectile.

“Since when did you start caring about people?” Erasto pushes himself up.

“I don’t, but do you know how much paperwork I’ll have to do if you die under my watch?” She helps pull Erasto up.

“Well, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Beside, who is going to save my ass if I run into one of those things?”
Erasto chuckles and looks at the collapsed corridor. He calls Ed and Kokoro, “Hearts and I will be really late for your party. It seems like the Rukantee are sealing off the lower levels by destroying corridors.”

“Yeah, our path is completely blocked,” Leilah adds in. “We will have to circle around.”

“We can’t really wait for you two,” Ed response.

“Why is that?” Erasto asks.

“We are following an elite Rukantee to Michelina’s last known location while chit-chatting with it.”

“Following and chatting?”

“It’s complicated. If you think you will encounter those Phantoms, freeze yourself and don’t move. They only attack if they see motion and smell you. Don’t attack them directly.”

“Thanks for the advice. We’ll head your way as fast as we can. Over and out.”

Lailah and Erasto returns back to the shadow above the light fixtures to avoid the Rukantee who are inspecting their demolition and back the way they came from.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 06:01 pm Greenwich Mean Time =

= Sept. 12, 2010. 01:01 pm Central Standard Time =
High orbit over Lisona, fourth planet of the Ferisal System

“Phantom,” Hayley contemplates in her ready room next to the Queen’s bridge as she goes over the database. “I can’t believe we don’t have anything in the database remotely similar to this. March!”

Oh no, I know we do have information on the database. They are just very classified. One glance and you’re dead kind of classified.

March appear from thin air, “Yes master?”

“Analyze all, if anything similar to the Phantoms from any sources,” Hayley orders. “Rumors, urban legends, even bed time stories for scaring children from any known civilizations. I don’t care how unreliable they are, I’ll be satisfied if you get me even one word of information.”

135
“Right away master,” March says as he pours Hayley some tea and puts his hands on her shoulder. “Don’t stress out master we’ll solve this problem.”

“I don’t want to face something like this on the battlefield. I’ve never seen a Priority Omega Biohazard on record, even with my clearance. How can I keep something like this contain?”

“Don’t worry, they are the best of the bests and you are the best. They’ll help you keep it contain.” With that, March walks out of her office.

Hayley continues to research dreadfully and seeping the cup of tea to calm her nerves.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 06:06 pm Greenwich Mean Time =

= Sept. 12, 2010. 01:06 pm Central Standard Time =
Fifth planet of CXT-12834 System

Back down below the planet’s surface, Ed and Kokoro finally reach the once locked corridor with the lone Rukantee in front of them. A pool of smeared blood is covering the floor. So much blood, there is at least two litters. Please be alright Michelina.

The lone Rukantee looks down at the bloodstain. “Foolish humans, what have you done?”

“We didn’t know what would’ve happened at the time,” Kokoro almost in tears with the sight of Michelina’s bloodstain. Michelina has to be alright, I need her. She can’t just die here, you need her.

“She was acting against orders,” Ed answers with worries.

“The past is behind us. At the present, this door must be sealed,” The Rukantee says as it walks to the door’s control. The control panel is all clawed up. The lone Rukantee isn’t giving up and it continues to diagnose the door in attempt to find another way to seal it.

After a minute, it looks back up and disappointingly says, “Cleansing their hive is the only way to stop these cursed creatures now.”
The lone Rukantee turns and walks towards the yellow ominous glow.

“Do you know how these things came to be?” Kokoro asks as they enter the corridor.

“The cursed of the Phantom came to be when a young arrogant warrior millennia ago wanting to be more powerful. This is a song fathers often sing to younglings.”

The lone Rukantee starts to sing soulfully. Ed and Kokoro’s translator automatically stop generating result in audio format but instead, it started to translate in text so the unreplicable beautiful voice of the Rukantee will not be blocked out.

“A weak young warrior sought a mysterious sorcerer against his elders’ advice.

The youngling wanted power and the sorcerer offered.

The sorcerer deceived the young warrior and cursed him to consume his village.

But the sorcerer misjudged the wickedness of his own curse.

The wicked curse consumed the young warrior and transformed him into a monster.

Rage filled his heart and he consumed the sorcerer.

These two corruptions continued to consume the village.

Two corruptions transformed into a plague.

A plague converted into a scourge.

Village after village, city after city, tribe after tribe, the scourge ascended into the cosmos in attempts to corrupt even the mighty gods.

They attacked, they corrupted, they disappeared.
They are phantoms for no one foresaw
their creeping encroachment.
No warrior or sorcerer or hunter can track these monstrosities.
Even after the devastation of metropolitans,
no soul can follow the Phantoms’ trail.
Few ever survived and fewer sought vengeance,
yet eight commoners who survived, journeyed for vengeance.
For these Noble Eights are strangers from different castes,
they know not of each other’s action,
but bonded by their aspiration.
They quested for ages and with luck, they found a besieged city.
The gods were moved by their courage and their spirit.
The Noble Eight was bestowed the Eight Blessed Axes.
They fought fearlessly and found salvation for the city.
The mightiness of The Noble Eight’s
vengeance frightened the Phantoms,
for they had escaped all Rukan planets a
never dare to corrupt again.
For the Noble Eight having no family to return to,
the gods ascended them to join their side.
Forever more, the gods along with the Eight
watches over all Rukantee across the stars.”
The lone Rukantee stops signing. “This is but a legend, scholars are still perplexed from how they came to be and when they came to be. Some say the Phantom scourge appeared before our civilization even went into the cosmos while others argue it was first released in a mining colony centuries after we took flight into the cosmos.”

“Interesting story,” Ed says, still, with his gun pointing at the Rukantee.

“All stories have small origin of truth,” the Rukantee replies.

“I know, I saw the mythical Phantoms just as you did.”

We know very much about the Rukantee, but not this song. They are very protective of their children. No human, Earthlings or otherwise, has seen a pre-adult Rukantee, let along know of the youth culture. So there never was opportunities for us to hear this song.

As they proceed, the corridor gets increasingly slimy with yellow ooze and occasionally, webs spin into an octagonal fractal pattern. The deeper they venture, the less of the original corridor they can see.

The corridor eventually breaks off into a cliff on the side of a vast cavern. An ominous glowing yellow structure made of web, just a bit smaller than the size of the Great Pyramid of Giza, stands in the middle of the cavern.

“This is interesting,” Ed stares at yellow web pyramid and his teeth starts to chatter. He is afraid. His heart rate is rising through the roof. His brain activity is going really high. He must be sensing something going on.

“It almost looks beautiful,” Kokoro gazes with awe and fear.

“The hive temple must be purged while it has not fully awoken from its slumber,” the Rukantee says.

They continue down the cavern. Sacks of yellow sphere glowing from the inside line up in fractal pattern alone the bottom of the cavern.
“Light, Butterfly, you two is nearing Michelina position,” Colbert contacts them with very mild static interference. “I’m putting in a command to your suit’s computer to mark the location of Michelina the next time her signal is broadcasted.”

“Roger that,” Ed says. “I think we are nearing a nesting ground. We can get a scan soon.”

“Glad to hear. Guide Light,” Colbert says with worries, “as with the nesting ground of many animals, it might be defended.”

All of a sudden, the Rukantee stops and holds its arms out signaling Ed and Kokoro to stop. The two pause in their path and is probably wondering what is going on. The lone Rukantee suddenly cloaks away into invisibleness.

“Where did it go?” Kokoro raises her weapons. “Hurry, look with your Psych Vision.”

Ed looks down, “You can see it too.”

“What?” Kokoro slowly spins around to search.

“You can see its foot print,” Ed points down. “Let’s activate our camo too.”

As the two’s suits changes its colors to match their surrounding and holographic images displays surround them, the Rukantee starts to move again. The lone Rukantee has an actual cloaking device, it is not even casting a shadow, just some simple ripples of light on his body. With each step they take, Ed notices how there are more and more movement under their feet. The Rukantee’s movement slows down the further they intrude into the hive. Ed slowly takes out the scanner and attaches it to his palm. They are entering the nesting ground.

Ed slowly creeps to one of the yellow egg sack. He looks into its soft transparent skin like shell and sees a faint silhouette of a skeleton structure. Slowly raising his arm up, he holds his palm above the sphere, “Tomorrow, I am scanning now. Patching in the data.”

“Thank you. We’ll start analyzing right away,” Colbert jumps out of her chairs as she reads the data being displayed on the screen. Not being an expert in biology, she calls in Dr. Vergara and the doctors on board to help with the analysis.

>>BING<<
Yes! Michelina is still alive. At the very least, we know where she is.

“Did you get that, Butterfly?” Ed asks and looks off towards a certain direction.

“Yes. We need to hurry,” Kokoro prepares to sprint off but Ed stops her immediately to prevent attention from being drawn.

“I know, I know, but calm down. We don’t want to be the rescued.”

Kokoro nods.

They tiptoe away from the Rukantee to the signal in hopes to rescue Michelina. After a few steps, the Rukantee stops its movement and backtracks to where Ed and Kokoro separated and follows their footprints.

“Spread out, move slow,” Ed looks for Michelina’s life sign with sensor telemetries displaying on his visor.

“I just hope we are not too late,” Kokoro proceeds slowly.

Ed sees the Rukantee standing impatiently and wondering what they are doing.

“Found her,” Ed spots Michelina’s faint beacon highlighted on his visor.

Kokoro sees an outline of the camouflaged Ed on her visor and sneaks towards him as fast as she can without going too fast. They look inside the small egg sack with a dim glows is a small silhouette of a small human figure.

Kokoro scans the egg.

…

Michelina is inside of it.

Thank you. We found her! If you believe in a god of some sort, please thank him or her or them for me.

Kokoro flips open her butterfly knife and raises it in preparation for freeing Michelina. Ed quickly grabs her arm as she trust the knife down.

“Too messy for your knife,” Ed says and takes out his standard issue combat knife from his shoulder strap.

“What are you doing?” The Rukantee whispers behind them and grabs Ed’s arm.
“Freeing our colleague,” Kokoro scans Michelina’s vitals.
“You will alert the creatures burrowed under us,” the Rukantee warns, “And your comrade is not what it used to be.”
“Our sensors say otherwise,” Ed says.
“Their eggs can swindle sensors. Have you not witness how fast they can curse their victims?”
“If they can interfere with our sensors than the only way to find if she is still human is to take her out. We refuse to leave her here.”
“Tockfush!” The Rukantee swears a profane phrase with no possible Earthly translation. “I shall take my leave now as you will be a most opportune lure for my objective.”
“Alright,” Ed lowers his knife. “I’ll wait until you are in position.”
“Thank you,” the Rukantee replies and leaves. “You are surprisingly honorable.”
“Wait, what is your name?” Kokoro asks.
“You will die soon,” it stops, “knowing my melody will matter not.”
“Tell us so we can die knowing who helped us this far.”
“My military melody is Kelito kek Farichia,” it sings. It roughly translates to the Graceful Leaves of the Kelito Tree.
“That’s beautiful.”
“Fairwell,” the Rukantee turns around and heads for the hive temple.
“Thank you,” Ed waits until Kelito kek Farichia ventures far enough away.
“Humans,” Kelito kek Farichia says over the comm. as he climbs up foot hill to the pyramid, “Make prayers to your gods. The Rukantee souls will not ascend to the heavens if we are corrupted by the Phantoms. Whether your gods will allow your souls to enter their domain after the Phantoms’ corruption is a mystery to me, however you should end your life honorably to prevent your own suffering.”
“We won’t give up without a fight,” Ed replies.
Kelito kek Farichia clings onto the bottom of the pyramid, “I am ready. May your gods show you their blessing.”
Ed pulls his knife up and thrust it into the shell of the egg sack. The ground slowly trembles. Yellow goo seeps out and Ed drags his knife down to tear open up a hole big enough to get Michelina out. He reaches into the capsule of goo to grab a hold of Michelina. Kokoro takes Ed’s rifle from his back and loads a grappling hook into the grenade launcher attachment on the underside of it to prepare for escape.

Ed tugs on Michelina’s back armor plate, but the goo is refusing to let her go and yanks back. Kokoro aims up in search of a suitable spot to escape to as the ground trembles more and more powerful like an earthquake. Ed squeezes on his knife handle and it electrifies the blade, delivering a high current shock into the egg. The goo lessens its tension and releases Michelina. Ed pulls her out and cradles her unconscious body in his arms. She still looks human.

“Ready to go?” Kokoro shoots the grappling hook up then attaches the rifle on to her back and holds onto Ed and Michelina.

“Yes!” Ed replies and they soar up as the rope retracts.

Looking down below them, a hoard of Phantoms burst from the ground in wild rage trying to jump at them, the intruder who took one of their young. A bright spherical glow appears from the center of the organic pyramid and slowly expands outward as it vaporizes every creature with in the blast radius. As they reach the top of the cavern, the blast of light fades away after reaching the steep walls of the cavern.

That brave Rukanteen might have just destroyed the source of the Phantom, but they are already out and making more of themselves.
High orbit over Lisona, fourth planet of the Ferisal System

Hayley is tired from researching in her office on the Queen.

“Master,” March enters Hayley’s office, “I’ve been analyzing the data of the scan done by the team and it is rather odd.”

“What is it March?” Hayley asks from behind her desk with piles of notepad.

“The quark scans came up with something never seen before but we cannot figure out what it means yet.”

“What is it?”

“There are six flavours of quarks: up, down, charm, strange, top, and bottom in the Standard Model, but we found one that isn’t any of these. Some of the subatomic particles in these Phantoms are unknown because of this. The science team is working on this. Even I am having trouble trying to fit this discovery into the Standard Model.”

I hope the civilian scientists back on Earth won’t make any discovery related to a new quark like this. They would have to rework the entire Standard Model. Our science department is going to have a field day trying to rework the model.

“What about their genetic makeup?” Hayley asks with concerns.

“This is clearer but still confusing. The Phantoms DNA structures are tightly compacted quadruple helix not double like most known life forms. That isn’t even the strangest characteristic. There are genetic codes hidden inside the genetic code.”

“What do you mean codes inside code?” Hayley looks up stressfully from her notes.

“If we are analyzing these correctly, the specimen Sergeant Alfred scanned is only a simple strand of what the Phantoms can become. The one the he scanned only has seven chromosomes but we decoded it and found over a thousand chromosomes. The science team is still trying to piece everything together. These chromosomes contain genetic information of thousands of species across hundreds of worlds.” March’s lip is trembling. He is scared. It is not uncommon for an AI to be emotional.
“It does make sense if they reproduce by incorporating other species,” Hayley says as she swipes through pictures of those animals holograms hovering over her desk.

“We found one really disturbing thing…” March says with hesitation and a look of fear.

“March?”

March takes a deep swallow, “Three of the genes we found are of Earth origin, Asian elephants, an extinct species of tigers from India, and a species of monkeys, also indigenous to India and southern Asia.”

A notepad falls from Hayley’s grasps, “These things have been on Earth before?”

“At least four thousand years ago.”

Yes, I remember now. The Phantoms were on Earth before. We had to exterminate most of the Indus people living in the ancient north-western India city of Mohenjo-daro because of it. I watched one of the first, greatest, and most peaceful civilizations on Earth die so I can save the rest of the world.

This information isn’t going to be released to anyone. This is classified because it will have an overwhelming affect on Earth culture and science if anyone finds out. Some civilians have vaguely figured this out, but they are all seen as crazy people seen on that TV channel that is supposedly all about history. Am I glad they are not taken seriously?

“That isn’t the alarming part,” March grimly continues.

“How can that not be alarming?” Hayley shockingly asks.

“There are genes of five space-traveling organisms. One of them is capable of psychically induced FTL and another has an organic warp drive as a vital organ.”

“Faster than light?” Hayley rests her forehead on her palms, “They can travel faster than light? They have to be intelligent in some way to control that kind of ability.”

“Yes, master,” March’s head dips with worries. “With information of Rukantee troop movements from the Colonel, we estimate their containment will fail in one hour.”

“How fast can the nearest medical ships get there?” Hayley asks with calmness and poise.
March unscrolls a map from thin air and answers, “Four hours.”
“What about us?”
March shakes his head. “Two hours but even if the containment is estimated to last longer, our ship is not equipped to handle biological outbreak of this scale.”
Hayley stands up and storms out of her ready room and into the bridge. In front of the strategic table, she leans on it and fixes her eyes on the planet on the map. “To Night Hawk team,” opening a comlink, “Using any means necessary, you are to exit the complex in twenty minutes.”
“YUS!!” Leilah yells. “I can kill!”
“Don’t get too excited. I am sending a Class-6 Warp-breach Missile to contain this biohazard situation. Far Seer, paint the target.”
“Yes madam,” Faustine aims her rifle to mark the exact coordinate of the base. “I’ve never launched a nuke before.”
“You’re not launching it, we are. You are just telling us where it should go.”
“Alright.” Faustine switches her rifle to painting mode and holds down the trigger as a laser reads the coordinate from the tip of her rifle.
“Madam, may I remind you this will cause a diplomatic nightmare with the Lisonait and the Rukantee as well.” March informatively says. “Our non-aggression treaty with them prevents us or the Rukantee to…”
“Your concern is noted,” Hayley cuts him off, “but the situation is unfolding too fast for us to travel to non-sovereign space and you said my other plans are impractical.”
“Wait!” Ed yells from atop of cavern with some statics, “Goddess’s armor has been compromised. She won’t survive the hit.”
Faustine instantly releases the trigger, stopping the target from being locked by the Queen’s weapons system.
“We cannot risk these things getting out,” Hayley signing an authorization document on a notepad to launch the missile.
I’ll be damned. They rescued Michelina, but now We have to nuke her. I can easily stop the missile launch, but it is either her or trillions sentient beings in this part of the galaxy…

“Do it…” Michelina weakly says as she is awaking while Kokoro is finishing up cleaning the wound on her left shoulder where her arm was.

“What?” Ed asks.

“Leave me…”

“No, we are not going to leave you behind,” He calmly says.

“I am…” Michelina breathes heavily, “a threat… now.”

“No you’re not.”

“According to… section four of…” She struggles with every word.

“Would you stop thinking like a war machine and just act like a scared child!” Ed yells at her.

Kokoro finishes treating Michelina’s wounds with a spray of stem cell regenerator on them. Ed picks her up and carries her as they lower themselves down from the top of the cavern.

“That’s how… I am…” Michelina weakly pushes herself away from Ed, but to no effect. “I swore… The Oath.”

“We all swore The Oath, but your life is just as important as anyone else,” Ed argues as they venture back to the once locked corridor.

“No… My life is… secondary… to all Civilians… back on Earth… I have… no one… No one will… miss me… nor shed tears.”

“Then I will cry for you,” Kokoro heartbreaks and tears falls under her visor.

“I will too.” Faustine lowers her rifle, “Madam, I can’t do it.”

“I know this is hard, but there are no other choices,” Hayley clutches her fists. “We can’t risk these things getting out.”

“They will… bring me… back… after I die,” Michelina comforts them.

“I hate to agree with her,” Rashid joins in, “But she is right. The Renatus will bring her back.”

“I don’t like this at all,” Caracara frustratingly joins in, “But I agree.”
“But people say you suffer incomprehensible trauma from the regeneration process,” Faustine argues and that is a fact. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the mildest of the possible side effects.

“We can’t,” Erasto discourses, “Going through all that can permanently change someone mentally.”

“Just leave her already,” Leilah annoyingly comments, “I want to go home.”

“Stupid… sirs, madams… Is my life… worth… trillions… of other lives… in the… our quadrant… of the… galaxy?” My brave little soldier stubbornly and weakly says.

“Far Seer, you heard her,” Hayley says.

“But…” Faustine rebuttals but gets cut off.

“Do it now! These things are capable of FTL. They can easily reach Préhension and even Earth,” Hayley pounds the strategic table, “You call down the thunder!”

Tears flow down Faustine’s face as she holds the trigger and paints the target, “You’ll reap the whirlwind.”

The map on the table flashes as tactical officer initiates the launch sequence.

>>Warp-burst launch initiated<< March announces.

>>Missile hit in fifteen minutes<<

The missile leaves the Queen’s forward silo and two glowing pylons extend from the main body. Hayley turns her back away from the view screen of the image of the missile jumping into warp and walk back to her ready room.

The door behind her closes and immediately she swipes everything off of her table. Notepads fall, transparent digital papers float down gently, tea set shattering, and fists pounding on the table.

“I can’t do anything right!”

She keeps hitting her table and tears keeps falling.

“The first lost in my career. And it had to be a kid!”

The glass table cracks and she spiritlessly looks up.

“It’s all my fault.”

She lifelessly falls down and crunches up into fetal position.
“I knew someone this young and inexperienced would have jeopardized the mission. Why did I listen to command and send her on this mission?”

Tears flood around her.
Her breath shortens.
She starts to cough out blood.
March appears and sits down next to her.
“It is all my fault,” A few more deathly cough.
March grabs Hayley and holds her in his arm as she continues to blame herself.
“Those things would have still been sealed if it weren’t for me.”

Tear drops after tear drops, March’s holographic shoulder is being drench as he provides support for his owner while knowing full well whatever he will say to comfort and refute her self-hatefulness right now would be rejected. So he just sticks with a simple yet comforting, “Let it all out.”

And she is doing just that, that’s why she is a great leader. Hayley cares about everyone under her command like family. Often, she would visit her troops unexpectantly just to check up on them, but she would do so in a very intimidating manner. She has granted the most vacation time compared to any other military generals. If there are anyone under her command is injured, for any reason, she would go visit them in the hospital. For serious injuries, she would even stay overnight in the hospital, but in secret since she doesn’t want people to think she is soft. She shed sweats and tears for every last one of them, even though she doesn’t show it to anyone ever. She is stern yet caring, like a strict parent.

Back on the planet, Erasto and Leilah are crawling their way towards Ed, Kokoro, and Michelina via a maintenance tube.
“We finally are at the elevator to the lowest level,” Erasto calls Ed. “Are you three there yet?”,
“Almost. Can you take it down and meet us,” Ed requests.
“Certainly.”
Leilah reluctantly follows and they go down on the elevator. Ed, Kokoro, and Michelina are already waiting in front of the
elevator with the sound of the Phantoms’ foul footsteps echoing from the end of the corridor.

Twenty floors left.

“Hurry up!” Ed yells and loads up an incendiary grenade into his rifle while holding Michelina in his arms.

“Hold on,” Erasto looks at Leilah and she holds on to a railing in the elevator. He electrifies the elevator and the linear magnetic rails system and guides it as he increases the electric current on the rails, making the elevator go faster. Leilah’s feet slowly lift off the floor as they are nearing freefall.

Eight floors left.

Erasto stops his ability and the electric current returns to normal as the elevator slows down to the floor of Ed and company.

“Thank you,” Kokoro says as she holds the elevator door for Ed with Michelina in his arms.

As the elevator door closes, Ed shot off that incendiary grenade into the corridor. He can’t see the result as the door is now closed shut but I doubt normal flames of the incendiary grenade will give any lasting effect on these Phantoms.

Outside, Rashid and Caracara meets up with Faustine on the gentle hill she had originally landed on. Rashid reads sensor location of the others on his sensor, “Your signals are still in the base. You have eight minutes to get out before the nuke arrives.”

If they don’t get out in time, they’ll get buried by the nuke with melted materials.

“We know,” Erasto manipulates the elevators to launch up and the group holds on tight to the railing in order to prevent themselves from being pushed down to the floor. “There is an elevator that leads up to the roof near our stop. We’ll be using it as an exit.”

“We are supposed to go away from to nuke,” Leilah irritantly says, “Going up will take us closer to the nuke.”

“Trust me,” Erasto takes out a few diamond tipped steel needles as the elevator comes to a stop.

The door slides open. Kokoro peaks out from one side of the door with her pistol in her hands and Leilah peaks out on the other
side with her cards. Erasto walks out into the corridor with needles in both of his hands, each pointing at the two ends of the corridor.

“Clear,” Erasto says from their right and Kokoro and Leilah say from he left.

Erasto leads the way towards the next elevator three sections away.

“We got company,” Kokoro looks on her sensor. Both Rukantee and Phantoms are battling it out at the next junction.

“I’ll take care of the Ruk,” Leilah enthusiastically says and with glimmer in her eyes. “You two take the monsters.”

“We don’t have time for an engagement,” Ed looking at Michelina’s condition. She is about to faint but is refusing to do so.

“He is right,” Erasto puts away his needles, “You girls throw some flash bang at the Rukan and I’ll fry the Phantoms.”

Leilah swears under her breath in disappointment.

As the group approaches the skirmishing corridor junction, Leilah and Kokoro pull the pins off of a few flash bang grenades and throw them around the corners. Their visors polarize to protect their eyes as the grenades explode into a glowing light and they appear on the other side of the glow without even slowing down by half a step. All of their heart rate is up high and their breathing is rapid.

The flash bang distracts the Rukantee for a few seconds, but a few of the Phantoms that survived the shock are recovering faster than the Rukantee are from being blinded by the flash bang. That isn’t good for them. The team is moving away from that little skirmish and I can only guess the Rukantee are now being turned into Phantoms.

Finally, they arrive at their exit, another elevator.

“M.A.C., this better work!” Leilah yells as she hops into the elevator.

“Don’t worry,” Erasto says and places his palms on the elevator floor, “when it comes to magnets and electricity, only laws of physics is my limit.”

The group brace by lowering themselves to the floor and Erasto charges up and the elevator shots up in the elevator shaft, like a bullet in a gun barrel.
“Two minutes left,” Rashid informs them.
The elevator bursts out of the roof and into the night sky under two moons. The top of the elevator is squished from the impact with the roof.

“Kids,” Erasto pushes against the door, “when I open the door, drop out and glide as towards Spearhead’s position.”

The group nods and Erasto uses his magnetic hands to push open the door. They hop out and glide down yet again.

“One minute,” Rashid announces as he looks up at the group.

“Lower your trajectory!”

They have to land before the nuke hits or else they’ll all get flung extremely far away by the shockwave. This is a nuisance when it comes to nuclear blast. Too low, you’ll get buried, too high, you’ll get thrown away.

The group points their heads down to increase their speed and lower their altitude. They deploy their force field parachute at the last possible moment.

Ed says to Kokoro. “Right when the missile hits, hold on to me and sandwich Michelina. And have your visor block your eyes from the blast completely. You won’t have a flashback. Not this time. You hear me?” Ed says with concern in attempt to reassure her that she will not relive the traumatic memories of her ancestors.

“Don’t worry, onii-sama, you are my lucky charm. It won’t happen,” Kokoro says with confident.

Between the complex and Rashid’s group, they land with clouds of prairie grass puffing up from their impact.

>>Warp-burst missile detected<<

“Remember to duck and cover,” Rashid runs behind a hill and his group follows.

Kokoro holds on to Ed and hugs him tightly with Michelina in between them. Erasto and Leilah crouch down and cover their heads.

“Armor Lock NOW!” Rashid yells.

Lines of light appears on their suits and their entire suits harden, preventing them from moving. A thick green force field generates around their body, giving them an extra layer of protective skin/armor.
Directly above the complex, a circle of white warp exhaust light appears and the missile stretches out from a single speckle of light in the middle of the circle accompanying by a loud sharp ear piercing whooshing sound. It falls from the sky and as it is about to hit the roof of the complex, the missile disappears into a bright glow as bright as the sun. Night turns into day.

A nuclear explosion? No. Everyone calls it a nuke but it’s not. The frightful brightness is a breach of fabric of space from an overloaded warp engine.

It is impossible to see the base as the glowing light melts it away instantly. The peaceful prairie flashes into flame and, just as instantaneous, into nothingness, not even ashes are left. A wall of plasma hot air thrusts outward from the glow in every direction, flinging everyone from their positions. In mere seconds, the barren ground boils into a sea of molten red.

From Ed’s eyes, under his polarized visor, he sees the glow slowly fading into a mushroom cloud as he and whom he is holding onto is spinning and twirling in the air. After a few seconds in the thousands degree air, they hit and shatter the red glowing ground and shards of the ground flies out like a sledge hammer breaking a large piece of ice. Imbedded into the ground and unable to move because of the Armor Lock, Ed involuntarily faces the mushroom cloud as it rises into the ominously bright sky.

The clouds in the sky moves away from the epicenter of the blast in a perfect circle and the sky starts to sprinkle pretty little sparkles reflecting and refracting the light from the mushroom cloud. Ed, breathing heavily, turns his eyes to look up and follows one of these sparkles down, almost in awe by the beauty of them falling like snow and sticking to his armor.

Glass, falling from the red sky.
Glass, as far as eyes can see.
Glass, nothing but glass.
Chapter Five:
Glass like Snow
Chapter Six

After having a filling brunch and discussion on a certain Sunday school teacher, Ed’s family returns home. Finally, he can go hang out with Lisa and try to ask her out.

“YAH!!!” Ellen kicks open the back door and already unzipping the back of her Sunday dress. “I hate wearing dresses!”

Completely opposite of Ellen, Elizabeth is refusing to change out of her white Sunday dress.

Ed’s mom scolds her and tries to get her to go change.

Elizabeth refuses while trying to get the chocolate ice cream from the fridge.

“Saying you won’t let it happen doesn’t mean something else won’t make it happen.”

“But mom…” She whines while playing with a bow on her dress.

“Eli,” Ed kneels down and says. “Royal families have different outfits for different occasions. A princess would never eat while wearing a ceremonial dress. You should go and change out of your Sunday ceremonial dress and into something more proper for eating.”

“Okay,” Elizabeth runs off to her room.

“Eliza,” Ed’s dad wraps his arm around his wife’s waist, “looks like we can run off to retirement and leave raising the kids for Ed to do.”

“That does sound nice,” Ed’s mom says. “But what’s the fun in that? I’ve only embarrassed Ed once in front of his girlfriend and I haven’t scared off any boys chasing after Ellen yet.”

Ed leaves his parents be in their own little world and heads up to his room. He takes his tie off and whips out his cell phone and calls Lisa.

“Hey Lisa,” Ed says on his phone. “I just got home from church and lunch with the family.”
“Hi Ed, I think I’ll be home soon.” Lisa says with the humming of the sound of the road from outside her family car. “We got out of church a little late. Just start coming over, hon, and I should be back by the time you get here.”

“Okay.”

“Sounds great. And honey, guess what I bought yesterday from Woodsfield Mall?”

“What?”

“I bought a pack of TruBlood.”

“The drink?”

“You know it.”

“Hot Topic?” Ed asks.

“Nope, F.Y.E. It fit the vampire themed movie day.”

“What is it in the real world?”

“Pop,” Lisa replies, “I wonder if it tastes like blood.”

“I don’t think blood would have an appealing taste. Liking vampire fic is one thing, being one is not what they make it out to be.”

“Oh sweetie, like you’ve met a vampire before.”

“Just saying,” Ed chuckles in irony since one of his mentors, Ophelia, is a vampire of Shakespearean proportion. “Being allergic to garlic and can’t come out during the day doesn’t seem fun.”

Lisa giggles, “I’ll see you soon, hon.”

“Okay, talk to you later,” Ed hangs up.

Ed looks in the mirror and is deciding what to wear to give Lisa a good impression. She is a bit classy, although unorthodox with her gothy style. So he should look sharp but if he put a tie back on, then he’ll look too uptight. He changes into a pair of black pants just so he won’t get his nice church pants dirty. Ed runs downstairs and announces his departure. He puts on his sneakers and grabs his laptop bag.

“Be back by supper,” Ed’s mom says from the living room while revising a book.

“I will,” heads out the back door.

“Who’s the hot date?” A voice from next to the door says.

Ed turns around and Ellen is standing next to the door.
“What do you mean?” Ed asks.

“You only took off your tie and changed your pants. When not in school, you only wear button up shirt on special occasion, yet you are wearing it out. So who is she?”

She is good. Ed’s work style is seeping through. He usually wears t-shirt, jeans, and a hoodie down here on Earth while classy with nice shirt and waistcoat up on the Grand Ship.

“Great imagination,” Ed walks to the garage.

“No, great observation,” Ellen crosses her arms. “You are also still wearing dress shoes.”

“So? You need proof if you are going to accuse someone,” Ed takes his bicycle out of the garage. “Read some more detective novels.”

“But my dear Watson, these are proof and I deducted what you’re going to do.”

There is no hiding fact from Ellen. She sees right through his behaviors.

“Objection!” Ed gets on his bike. “Predicting what might happen doesn’t mean that will happen.”

“I totally have enough for a solid case.”

“Just keep working on it, you nosy Sherlock,” Ed rides off for Lisa’s place.

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= Sept. 12, 2010. 07:17 pm Greenwich Mean Time =

= Sept. 12, 2010. 02:17 pm Central Standard Time =

Fifth planet of CXT-12834 System

Dead silence. The air tight suit is only allowing quite muffled sounds of the radioactive wind from the outside in. In this silence, Ed tries to look away from the mushroom cloud, his first nuclear-scale blast experience, but he can’t. His eyes can only roll so far away and his head can’t move because of the Armor Lock is holding onto every joint on his body, preventing him from moving. He tries to shuts his eyes, but for some reason, he can’t. His polarized visor is protecting his eyes from the brightness but not his mind from the sight of hell.
Ed’s heart rate is at the highest ever recorded on him. His breathing is so fast that he is fogging up his visor with every breath. Ed is at awe. Ed is afraid. As the speckles of melted glass fall and slowly bury him, Ed is afraid for the very first time on a mission. He is never fearless, he just knows enough about his missions so he won’t get scared, but not this time. The Phantoms, the nuke, these were not expected. He never prepared for these things.

In Ed’s arms are Michelina and Kokoro and he doesn’t know how they are. He can only tell so much from looking through the foggy visor.

**Flashes of text**

Suddenly, the visor comes to life with seemingly random texts and codes flickering upward.

```plaintext
>>Computer system restarting<<
...
......
........
>>Boot up complete<<
>>Running self diagnostic<<
...
>>No major system damage<<
>>Internal sensor recovered<<
>>Scanning vital<<
...
>>Radiation not detected<<
>>Minor bruising detected over large portion of the body<<
>>Armor Lock status:<<
>>Shield 12.4% dropping; Armor 95.3% stable<<
“Kokoro? Michelina?” Ed looks at them huddled up in his arms.
>>Communication system recovering. Wait time estimation: 6 minutes<<
“Switch to external communication,” Ed orders his suit’s computer.
“Damn it!” Ed sighs, “I can listen, but I can’t speak.”

“Scan Kokoro and Michelina’s vital.”

“Damn it,” Ed looks around as much as he can. “Locate Erasto and Leilah.”

Ed spots the silhouette of a small round ship approaching off in the distance. “Is it one of ours?”

Ed makes out what that ship is as it flies closer. The purple plated ship is not one of Ours. It slows down and lands before Ed’s eyes. Two Rukantee in the special armors, the same kind Ed and Kokoro saw earlier, walk out from the small ship.

One of them looks at Ed, “Murak teersu fuors…”

“… are the ones who released the cures.”

“Naive human,” the other one says.

“They are still alive,” this is the one named Kelito kek Farichia which Ed and Kokoro walked with.

The other one looks down and inspects them, “The one in the middle looks similar to an average human youngling.”

“Most human cultures we encountered consider that a taboo.”

“Earthling,” Kelito kek Farichia says. “They must be from Earth.”
“You are right. I have heard the anecdotes of how Earthlings send their younglings off into battle. No hostile human cultures do this beside Earth.”

“Perhaps it is a family activity for them,” Kelito kek Farichia speculates. “Shall we take them with us?”

“You and your pity. These things might be contaminated with the Phantom plague.”

“But our spears of cleansing are approaching,” Kelito kek Farichia pleads.

“That is precisely my reasoning. Leave them. It is better off for them,” it climbs back up to their ship.

“May your gods protect you,” Kelito kek Farichia says towards the three and climbs on as well.

The Rukantee ship flies off and silence fall once more.

What is going on through Ed’s head? This is his first nuclear explosion after all.

> > Communication system recovered <<

“…respond,” Ed hears Colbert’s voice and lets out a sigh of relieve.

“HERE!!” Ed yells in respond. “We are here. Kokoro and Michelina too.”

“The radio disrupting sensors.”

“Can you get a lock on our signal?”

“I know general location is,” Zhang adds in. “We’re coming you. We can’t teleport lock on.”

“You might want to hurry,” Ed looks up. “I think the Rukantee are sending in more nukes.”

“We know,” Colbert looks at her computer screen. “long range detected them. are enough to glass planet.”

This is one of the rare occasions where the Rukantee uses long range weapons.

“Don’t worry,” Zhang is already flying Tomorrow down to planet. “sent the shuttle to help search.”

“Don’t worry others. heard responses from,” Colbert reassures.
“Glad to hear,” Ed smiles.

Rashid, Caracara, and Faustine were quite far away in the first place and support team managed to estimate their location from the Faustine’s sniping point.

“Kokoro, you okay?” Ed turns his attention back down to the two in his arms.

“WATER!!! WATER!! I NEED WATER!! HURTS SO MUCH!!” Kokoro yells in Japanese but is being translated by the com system.

“Computer, read Kokoro’s vital.”

>>Cannot scan target [Butterfly]: Amor Lock interference<<

“Tap into her computer. Read her vital.”

>>Connecting computer systems<<

…

>>Computer system damaged: data is unreliable<<

>>Estimation: Minor bruising detected over large portion of the body<<

>>Estimation: No life threatening injuries detected<<

>>Estimation: No radiation detected<<

Kokoro is having a flashback. She is having something worse than flashback, it is a cross generational flashback.

“Lucky charm…” Ed whispers. “Don’t I wish that is true.”

>>Goddess: Have the other contacted us?<<

A message from Michelina pops up onto Ed’s visor. She is alive… That’s a relieve for me.

“Yeah, they are coming to get us. Are you okay?”

>>Goddess: Most of the system is damaged beyond repair. The only working part of the communication system is the short range text based messaging. My headset is not even working. Your audio data is translated into text.<<

“I don’t mean your suit. Are you okay?”

>>Goddess: I am fine. My Armor Lock did not work at all because of the damage to my suit. The protection
provided by you and Butterfly’s shields was quite effective against the explosion caused by that kind of warp-core breach. My vital monitor is heavily damaged and cannot be repaired, however, judging from the current environmental situation, I estimate my entire body is burnt from the radiation but I do not know to what extent.<<

“WHAT?! You are not okay.”
She’s not, but I’m still relieve at how she is still mentally functioning.

>>My body is in shock. I am not hurting. I actually cannot feel anything right now.<<

“...” Ed stays silent but there is no doubt that he is worried. “Tomorrow, prepare to receive radiation injuries.”

“I Static was hoping only Static suit’s communication Static damaged, Static nothing else,” Colbert says.

Ed is slowly easing down. He knows everyone is alive, even if not everyone is well.

A few kilometers away, Tomorrow’s vertical takeoff shuttle flies down to where Rashid, Faustine, and Caracara are at. The shuttle rotates its propeller engines up and hovers over the weak glassed ground. The rear hatch opens down into a ramp and a group of one medic and two engineers in white light weight environment armor jumps down onto the glassed ground.

As their boots touch the ground, it crunches like boots on icy snow. They are closer to the epicenter of the explosion and molten glass is falling like heavy slow. Each of the support team punches into the slightly molten glass and picks up each one in the groups and into the canoe.

Back over at where Ed is, Tomorrow slowly hovers above him and the others. Ed looks up with hope as it slowly hovers towards the ground and lowers its fore ramp. One medic and two
intelligence analyzers, all in environment armors, drop down and help them up. Colbert also hops down to help carry them up.

Tomorrow hovers up and closes its loading ramp. Ed, with Kokoro and Michelina in his arms, are placed onto a cart and the medics spry them with canisters of iodine based radiation remover and slide them through a metal square frame with a layer of green light in the frame to further decontaminate them.

Colbert informs Zhang over the comm. that everyone on the team has been retrieved. Tomorrow flies up as the Rukantee missiles rains down from space. The recovery team pushes Ed and the others into the elevator for the medical bay above. The shuttle approaches with its nose pointing upwards. As it is trying to catch up with Tomorrow, its engines retract its propeller blades allowing the supersonic jet engines to activate. They both pierce the air in ultra-sonic speed.

Half way up the atmosphere, the shuttle finally catches up with Tomorrow and Tomorrow’s rear hatch opens up as two poles extend out from the cargo bay, one from above and one from below. The shuttle latches onto the poles and its wings collapse and folds up as the poles retract back into Tomorrow along with the shuttle. The rear hatch closes and the recovery team leaps down with the three they picked up and does the same decontamination procedure as they did with the others.

Tomorrow jumps to standard warp leaving a bright ring of warp exhausts instead of being stealthy. They depart the luscious yellow and green planet below them being slowly engulfed by expanding rings of flames.

In the middle of deck two of Tomorrow Never Dies, is the medical bay. Unlike the rest of the ship’s silver and light gray interior, the medical bay has bright white sterile wall, it’s like a mix between a hospital surgery room and an Apple Store.

After passing the main entrance of the medical bay, a short hallway with windows on both sides greets Ed’s cart as he, Kokoro, and Michelina are being pushed into a room on the right. A square grid of light passes through the hallway and out of the medical bay to decontaminate the path had they just took as a precocious against any radiation they might have left behind.
In the corner of Ed’s eyes, he sees Erasto and Leilah, in their military issued underwear, being checked up by Dr. Vergara in an adjacent room. The doctor leaves the two, teleports on a biohazard suit, and enters the room Ed has been pushed into via an airlock decontamination chamber.

Dr. Vergara is the newly assigned medical officer for the Night Hawk. He stands overlooking Ed and inspects Michelina, “You alright?”

>> Goddess: I am guessing I am suffering from radiation burns. << Michelina replies via text. >>: but I do not know how serious for sure. And I am sure you noticed my left arm is missing. My body is also in shock so there is no need to worry much about pain. <<

“You are a bit matter of fact now, aren’t you?” Dr. Vergara light heartedly says.

>> Goddess: Allowing anything but logic to exist in this current moment will only hamper your job, Doctor Vergara. <<

“Then I should thank you,” Dr. Vergara replies.

“Is she going to be alright?” Ed asks.

“I’ll know when I pry you and Corporal Fukuda off,” Dr. Vergara waves to the engineers carrying Rashid’s group to come in to help chisel away the layer of glass encrusting over them.

Michelina is fine, in my book anyway. She is calm and coherent. Guardian government’s view on health puts mental health ahead of physical health.

“Hurry it up for her,” Ed says.

“That depends on how long the Armor Lock will last.” Dr. Vergara says and takes a fiber optic guided flexible needle to give Michelin a small dosage of pain killer from ripped opening of her armor, “Just in case.”

>> Goddess: I do not need that type of assistance, but thank you sir. << Michelina says without refusal while trying to hold on to her pride. …pride? Pride, that’s her flaw. She
is too prideful. Yet, she is truly brave. She is not hiding any fear. She isn’t afraid.

The engineers comes into the room and connects Ed and Kokoro’s suits up with some wires and starts to drain energies from them to reverse the Armor Lock. The muffled yelling of Kokoro is still being heard by everyone in the room.

“Her vital is okay. Why is she still screaming like this?” Dr. Vergara asks.

“It’s psychological,” Ed says.

“I’m a physician, not a psychologist.” Dr. Vergara takes a brain scan of Kokoro with a handheld scanner. “But I do remember reading something in her file about Post Traumatic Stress disorder.”

“Don’t I wish it is normal PTSD,” Ed irritatingly says, “instead she is having PTSD of events her grandparents faced.”

Kokoro’s screaming turns into tired painful moaning.

“The scan is done.” Dr. Vergara reads the results with an odd look, “It’s like her consciousness is here, but yet not here at the same time. She is like having an out of body experience. I’ll sedate her when we get her out of her armor.”

“It wouldn’t stop the pain. This is not exactly a normal flashback she is having. You can’t sedate people living in the past.”

“Are you telling me her mind is literally stuck in 1945?”

“Yes, that’s what her Temporal Experience ability does.”

Kokoro’s mind has traveled back in time and she is reliving her grandfather’s memory. She can’t change history or do anything with her own freewill, only reliving her ancestor’s memory. Her family is from Hiroshima, you can guess what she is seeing. If you can’t, pick up a history book.

All the energy in their Armor Lock systems has been drain and Ed is able to move and Kokoro starts flailing around slowly, trying to do whatever her mind is doing in 1945.

“It might not stop the pain but I am going to have her sedated when we get her out of her armor just to make sure she won’t hurt herself here,” Dr. Vergara points to one of the medic to tell him to wait in the other room.
“Alright…”

>>Goddess: Do you know what’s ironic?<< Michelina asks.

Dr. Vergara looks at the scan of Michelina’s body to determine the extent of her injury.

“What?” Ed asks back.

>>Goddess: I can hear everything she is saying<< Michelina rolls her eyes towards Kokoro. >>:Her calls out for water and the descriptions of her pain, of melted skin, and the pain of every single motion that she makes are exactly what I should be feeling right now, yet I am not. If only I can switch things around and feel what she feels and her not suffering those memories. I caused this, I deserve what she is experiencing.<<

Ed looks at Michelina with some respect for her maturity during certain time.

Dr. Vergara says to Ed to prepare for the removal of their suits.

Going to the point of paranoia in some Employee’s opinion, the standard procedure for taking off armors that has been in a nuke, or other types of bio-hazardous situations, is to beam the wearer to another room and the suit to a decontamination or destruction unit.

Twirls of lights sparkle around Ed and Kokoro as they teleport onto hospital beds in the room across the hall with their body in the same position as they were in the suit. Eratsto and Leilah are also in the room. They are blued and purpled, all bruised up. Ed relaxes, now in his underwear, from being stuck in one pose for over half an hour and hops out of the bed and check on Kokoro, who is also all bruised up. The medic, who is supposed to sedate Kokoro, walks over to her with a needleless needle in his hand and he is ready to give her a shot.

“Where am I?” Kokoro looks at Ed and asks in English.

“The med bay onboard Tomorrow,” Ed sits down next to her.

The medic, knowing there is no need for sedation, leaves the room and back to Dr. Vergara to help with Michelina.
“I had an episode, didn’t I?” Kokoro asks Ed.

Ed nods, “I think the teleportation brought you back.” He looks down, “Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have even mentioned it earlier and it wouldn’t have been on your mind and it wouldn’t have happened.”

“Don’t blame yourself, niisama. It wasn’t your fault,” Kokoro reassures.

Erasto throws a cylindrical container at Ed. He notices it in the edge of his eyes and catches it. It is a can of bruise treatment ointment.

Ed says thanks and opens up the container of ointment.

“I wonder how Michelina is doing,” Kokoro says as she rubs the ointment on her bruises.

“…” Ed says nothing and looks across the hall. Michelina’s semi-melted suit pretty much describes what condition she is in right now.

As they worry, the bruises on their skin slowly returns to their original colors.

Back across the hall, in the room next to Michelina’s surgery room, Rashid, Faustine, and Caracara are still stuck in their suit, waiting for their Armor Lock to be drain. They were farther away from the epicenter of the explosion and their Armor Lock wasn’t as used up as the others. They have to wait a longer time for the energy to be drain out of their suits.

“I hate how we can’t get a teleport lock on us with Armor Lock on. I have an itch I really want to scratch.” Caracara jokingly says, breaking the depressing silence.

“Unbelievable!” Faustine yells with tears in her eyes. “We have a child next door to us who is probably going to die and we are talking about scratching an itch?!”

“I know that,” Caracara’s tone changes. “I am worry too, but I just want to lighten the mood.”

Faustine says nothing as her lips trembles with the feeling of terribleness for what happened to Michelina and being glad that Caracara is trying to cheer them up. She has always been the caring mother of the team ever since she was assigned to this team.
“How did her armor get ripped up like that?” Faustine asks. “There is a layer of diamond in our suits.”

“Nano diamond plating,” Rashid starts to explain. “Unlike the diamond chainmail of the regulars, the nano diamond plating is connected with carbon nano-thread, not interconnected rings. Diamond chainmail would make our suits much heavier and the artificial muscles would need a larger power supply.”

“But our suits can stop bullets and swords,” Faustine says with frustration. “Why can’t it stop an animal from biting through it?”

“The suits and armors did what it was designed to do. They harden to protect against high velocity attacks but the slower the attacks the less effective.”

“And they told us we had a better chance to win a multimillion dollar lottery than die on combative duty,” Caracara looks towards Michelina’s room from the corner of his eyes.

Our suits are made of a layer of semi-liquid similar to those cornstarch things that you might have played with in science class when you were little. The slower the attack, the less the suit will harden, and the diamond plating will stop the rest of the energy from an attack. Unfortunately, our suits doesn’t protect against constant pressure at a very low velocity. They shouldn’t anyway. Their armors are made for stealth, not for combat. Why sacrifice mobility for security when in their line of work, their mobility is security?

In the next room, Dr. Vergara is standing over a holographic table with Michelina’s body on display and inspecting her internal organs for the seriousness of the radiation poisoning. Unable to move her body because of the sedative, Michelina rolls her eyes up to look at Dr. Vergara and sent him a text based message.

>>Goddess: Sir, please just tell me already. How serious are my injuries?<<

“Do you really want to know?” He looks at her from above.

>>Goddess: Yes I do.<<

Dr. Vergara explains to her that she is lucky to have survived. Ed and Kokoro’s shielding cut down lot of heat and radiation.
However, the dosage she received is still very lethal. Most of the radiation is spreading from her left shoulder where her armor ripped.

These are already what Michelina is guessing what happened but she wants the details.

Just listening to Dr. Vergara is depressing me. Michelina is suffering multiple organ failures. Kidneys, thyroid, and liver are about to give out. The medical team is giving her continuous supplies of nanobots and stem cells to help, but that would only slow down the degeneration. The Queen has a more capable medical facility and Captain Zhang is pushing the boat to the limit so they can get Michelina into a biotank full of stem cells and nanobots to stop and maybe reverse her injuries. Dr. Vergara also is calling Earth to place an order for a cloned arm so he can attach it to Michelina once she is mostly healed. She’ll be brand new in no time.

Michelina is expecting to hear most of what Dr. Vergara is saying. She’s not surprised at all.

>>Goddess: I am guessing my armor has not been removed is because of my skin has melted onto it. Tell me everything, I can take it.<<

“Eighty six percent of your skin has been melted, the rest are heavily burnt” Dr. Vergara says with fright. “Certain muscles are also melted and some parts are just gone. Your mouth is partially sealed and your eyelids are just gone. The shockwave must have blown a large amount of dust into your left shoulder because it got glassed. The molted glass almost reached your heart.”

>>Goddess: How come I have yet to show some of the symptoms of radiation poising yet? Where is the vomiting and diarrhea?<< Michelina curiously asks.

“You physically can’t do those things right now because of the damages.”

>>Goddess: I should be dead. How am I not dead?<<

“It’s a miracle.”

169
>>Goddess: I do not have a god nor own any Unexplainable charms and since I am a Psychic, I physically cannot perform any magic or accept the aid of any deity that cannot be proven by empirical scientific data.

“They’re called Unexplainable for a reason,” Dr. Vergara has some hope in his eyes. “You never know if an angel is watching over you.”

I am watching over her and every one of them, but I’m far from being an angel, not even a faux one. I wish my power can extend that far away from Earth, then I could have protected her today.

Leilah angrily marches out from the room across from Michelina’s room after treating her bruises and pounds on the window to catch Michelina’s attention. She presses an icon on the window’s display and gently asks, “What the hell were you thinking you little bitch?”

>>Goddess: Specify please.<< Michelina professionally inquires with text.

“Let me see which part,” Leilah chuckles with a bit of sarcasm. “Oh, how about you running off against order, or unleashing a horde of mutagen-spreading-mindlessly-infesting-meat-shredding-eating-machine, or making Checkmate to launch a nuke and making you end up worse than a pile of overcooked burnt meat?”

>>Goddess: I wanted to prove to the team of my value and proof to myself that I can solve any problem. I was not able give up on that door. I apologize for the consequences of my action.<<

“Apologize? This isn’t a little rant like the one you gave. Did you expect to get off this without consequences because you are a prized possession of the higher ups?” Leilah scolds.

>>Goddess: No madam.<<
“Why the hell are you so special to them? Let me tell you what you are, you are just a snotty little kid who is wearing mommy’s high-heels and play pretend going-to-work.”

>>> Goddess: I do not understand your analogy. <<<

“I am saying you are just a little worthless brat who doesn’t know what you’re doing and pretends to know everything because the bosses pamper you. You know everything and anything my ass. NO! You know what?” Leilah raises her voice. “You are not a kid. You are just a monster in child form created by the higher ups. If you aren’t on pain killer right now, I would come in there and kill you slowly. I would enjoy it too! You messed everything up!”

“Fine!” Michelina yells, not via text, “You want to punish me? You want me to be in pain. I deserve it. I will do it NOW!!” Fighting the pain killer and sedative, she gets up screaming under her sealed mouth and uses her right arm to tear off her armor’s chest plate melted to her body.

Leilah starts to laugh, “I really hope you won’t die just yet from the pain…”

A fist flies

Leilah tumbles down.

Standing above her is Faustine in endless tears.

Leilah, surprised at her action yells, “What the hell was that?”

Faustine says nothing back to Leilah and turns to face Michelina, “Please stop.”

Michelina says nothing and continues to rip her armor off. She throws her helmet off, revealing her face completely burnt and her hair are all gone. Some of the skins are falling off.

The medics, with anesthesia in their hands, wait for the opportunity to sedate her, but hesitate to avoid causing more pain to her. The others start to gather around her room.

“Stop this now!” Rashid yells after being beamed out of his armor. “That’s an order.”

Michelina freezes motionlessly.

Rashid looks at Leilah, “Head up to your quarter. I’ll reprimand you later.”

171
“Yes sir,” Leilah gets up while rolling her eyes and walks off while giving Michelina the finger.

“Michelina,” Rashid says, “let the medics sedate you.”

Michelina stays silent and scrunches down in pain. She screams and continues to take off her suit.

“That’s an order. Let them sedate you now.”

Suddenly, the glass on her left shoulder starts crack and crumble. What’s left of her muscle returns to a flesh red state and the bone exposed from the wound starts to extend outward with a slight glow.

The medical team watches in awe and confusion. Muscles and arteries quickly reforms around her growing bones. Her skin turns back to pale from the scorched red and hair grows out from her bald burnt head. In mere minutes, Michelina’s body returns to as she was before the mission.

Stunned by what she just did, Michelina frightfully yells, “Get out!!! Seal this room under an Omega level quarantine!”

“Do what she says,” Rashid orders the medics. “Better safe than sorry.”

The medics beam out of room, leaving behind their empty biohazard suits to topple onto the floor.

“What just happened?” Faustine asks. “The sealed room prevented me from echolocating into the room.”

“She healed,” Erasto says in awe. “Back to normal.”

“This cannot be normal,” Michelina, standing naked in front of a holographic screen, is frantically reviewing every molecule of her genetic code.

“You might just have discovered a new Ability,” Kokoro tries to comfort her but there is no hiding her surprised and fear.

“New Abilities do not suddenly appear and reach to this high of a level.”

“The human body can do incredible things in the time of need,” Ed trying to reassure her with a clamming tone.

“What does this make you?” Caracara asks. “A higher level of Category B or a promotion to Category A?”
“This is impossible,” Michelina runs a scanner on herself. “I am still healing. The radiation from my suit is still attacking me, but I am healing at the same rate.”

“Just stay calm,” Rashid calmly says. “Just be glad that you are all better now.”

Michelina rolls her eyes towards Rashid, “Sir, I was bitten and entrapped in an egg of those things. I should not still be in this human form. I should have mutated seconds after they punctured my armor. Knowing I could be a possible destructor of the known universe is not a reassuring thought. Feel free to sterilize this room if need be, no warning needed.”

She’s right. No matter how much I am glad that she’s alright. I just can’t find it possible for her to not have any mutation.

“We’ll be meeting with the Queen a few minutes,” Captain Zhang announces over the com system.

“Don’t worry. We’ll have you looked at by the doctors and scientists on the Queen,” Rashid comforts her. “This little boat can only do so much.”

“No! Why are none of you understanding the gravity of the situation? Are you all in denial? You cannot bring me back to Earth. I am a biohazard risk. Lombardi to Captain Zhang,” Michelina calls up the captain on the bridge, “Set sail to the nearest star and beam me as close as to the core as you can.”

Well that escalated quickly. Throwing yourself into a star will insure containment of this Phantom problem, but that’s just a little extreme.

“What?” Captain Zhang replies.

“Don’t listen to her,” Rashid says. “He is a captain and you are a sergeant. I am a colonel and that makes me the highest ranking officer on this boat. You listen to me and you don’t get to boss anyone around. Now calm yourself down and let me consult with General Carroll on what to do.”

“She will agree with me,” Michelina yells. “You might as well dump me off at the nearest star and safe yourself the risk.”

“Calming down wasn’t a suggestion. It was an order. You clam to know everything and anything. In this case, try to follow your own catchphrase. Sit down and study your genes and what is
happening to you. You are probably the closest we have to an expert.”

Michelina grudgingly nods and continues to review her condition. She keeps scanning and rescanning herself. She is analyzing every quark that is in her genes. She just won’t take lucky as an answer. She is in denial about her recovery.

Chapter Six: Recovery
Chapter Seven

= Sept. 12, 2010. 07:27 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 12, 2010. 02:27 pm Central Standard Time =

Ed is gleefully biking his way to Lisa’s house. His heart is excited and his face is already starting to blush. I wonder if Lisa is going to be his girlfriend. The sun is out, the day is great, nothing can go wrong. She lives in the other side of this suburban town. There is no building too tall. The town is quite old so there is a lot of tall tree.

He has to go through the downtown area. This town might be beautiful, but it is still struggling with the recession. There is a lot of for rent and for lease signs up in the windows of dust filled vacant stores.

“Ed!” Someone says as he passes an alley.

Ed looks back and stops his bike. He leans his head back as he looks for Amelia who just called his name.

“Amelia?” Ed asks.

She comes out from the alley. “Hi Ed, are you busy right now?”

She is carrying various camera equipments, camera bag to her side, and tripod on her back.

“Not really. What’s up?” Ed hops off his bike.

“I lost a lens cap while taking some pictures in the alley. Can you help me look for it?” Amelia tilts her head and asks.

Ed walks his bike to the alley and props his bike up.

She smiles.

“Where did you last have it?”

“Over here,” Amelia leads Ed into the brightly lit alley to where several dumpster inhabits next to loading docks of commercial buildings.

Ed crouches down to look. “Why were you taking pictures here anyway? You should be careful. The news says gangs are spreading out into the suburbs.”

“…”

175
Suddenly, Amelia wipes away her smile and takes her tripod from her back at incredible speed. While this is happening she twirls and kicks Ed into a wall and pokes one of the tripod legs into Ed’s mouth. She is so fast and graceful that her long pony tail still floating in the air when she stops.

“Wha ar hall are ou uoing?” Ed calmly but struggling to ask. I assume he must be keeping his surprised emotion at what a tripod can be used for in the back of his mind. With his skill, he should be able to dodge this attack but Ed just doesn’t try when he’s back on Earth.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you. Do you know what this is?” Amelia asks calmly with no emotion but with a tilt of her head.

“Cri-aog?”

“Yes, this is a tripod, but no ordinary tripod. One of my father’s coworker is an engineer. He built this for me. It is a hydraulic-powered self-balancing instant deploy tripod. If I overload the hydraulic in the legs, they might punch out with a force powerful enough to break a vertebrate or two.”

“Uh ha....”

“I’ll put this simply. Don’t ever touch any of my cameras or equipments again or this will become a running gag.” Wow, Amelia holds on a grudge to a very trivial thing. It was yesterday when Ed took her camera because she was using flash photography so much that it would put a group of paparazzi to shame.

Ed nods slightly but quickly but calmly.

Amelia pulls her tripod away and takes several steps back.

“Running gags are supposed to be funny,” Ed says. “And for something to be considered a running gag, it has to happen at least three times.”

“Someone has been wasting time on TVtropes. I guess this isn’t funny. I should do something to bring up the mood of this story. I feel like there have been a few chapters of seriousness.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Amelia gives off a giggle. “I’m just breaking the fourth wall.”

“Looks like you should be the one seeking help from the counselor,” Ed says with a smile.
“Uh?”
“I was talking to myself Friday and you told me to talk to the school counselor.”
“Breaking the fourth wall shouldn’t be the reason. This should…” Amelia says like the tripod thing she pulled a minute ago shouldn’t be a reason. She quickly pulls out a box cutter and throws it towards Ed.

Ed doesn’t dodge or flinch. Of course he knows the cutter is not going to hit him. He might not be on alert but his training is always with him.

The box cutter whooshes by Ed’s right ear with a glare reflecting the sun. He catches it after the cutter is next to his head and he swiftly retracts the blade without looking at it.

“You really should get your own box cutter. It’ll be bad for the school’s reputation if anyone finds this with blood on it. You should be more thoughtful, student council secretary.” Ed taps on the printed student council and school name on the box cutter.

“Shouldn’t you be afraid of a crazy bitch like me?” Amelia asks and takes back her box cutter.

“You are not crazy,” Ed says.

“Oh…”

“Trust me you’re not,” Ed smiles, kneels down, and looks up at Amelia, “I sincerely apologize for offending you by messing with your camera.”

Click click click

“Apology accepted, but don’t you dare wrong me again.” Amelia extends her box cutter again. Even with her hostility, there is a certain calmness in the air. She slowly raises her arm with the box cutter in hand. Her body isn’t in a rigid stance of a person ready to fight. She is standing quite casually with her body swaying slowly from side to side.

“Alright…” Ed irritatingly says. “Calm down, will you? It’s just a camera.”

“I won’t chill out. You don’t know what they mean to me. They are my eyes to the world. They tell the truth and can’t lie, unlike you.”

“Me?” Ed points to himself.
“Yes you. You’re bitter, always bitter. I have never seen you once with a genuine smile, there is always some bitterness that you are hiding. You lie about everything. You hide the fact that you have a creepy narrator sporadically stalking you.” Is she talking about me? “You hide how you resentfully hate Sophie’s advances towards you. You hide the fact that you have feeling towards Lisa. You lie about everything by hiding it.”

“What?” Ed is genuinely confused. “First of all, what narrator and why do keep on breaking a proverbial fourth wall? What makes you think I have those kinds of feeling towards them?”

“Call it a character quirk, but this is my reality. If you keep interacting with me, I’ll keep breaking it like a running gag. Have you heard of the multiverse theory?”

Ed nods, “I didn’t know you are into science and you’re evading my questions.”

“I’m answering your question. Photographic science is my only interest, but anyway, there is an infinite amount of universes with infinite amount of possibilities. So I can certainly say we are living in a work of fiction.” I can’t argue with that. This is possible, We have access to different universes. For all I know, I really could be a narrator in a multimillion dollar book franchise or just some college kid’s thesis project.

“You of all people should wish this is all just a piece of fiction,” Amelia continues.

“Why should I?”

“I can tell, you have lots of sadness and tragedies in your life. Don’t you wish the traumas and pain in our lives to be a work of fiction, that we are just average, and all the suffering is just a figment of someone’s imagination?”

“No. Without all those things, happiness would be meaningless. How can we appreciate what we have if we never knew what it’s like to not have what we appreciate? And I refuse to believe that some omniscient narrator is controlling my every move and I am powerless to make my own decision.”

“Such a realist and about you, I know a lot about you because I take a lot of pictures. ‘A picture is worth a thousand words.’ You must have heard of that saying.”
Ed nods.

“I also take videos and those are worth sixty thousand words per-second. So I know a lot about you. I know you feel that the narrator is constantly stalking you. Your eyebrows scrunches in dismay very slightly every time you see Sophie in her slutty outfit, her promiscuity, and how she only see you as a sexual object rather than a person, yet I can see you respect her as an independent person, an intellectual, and her confidence in her own body image. Lisa, every time you see Lisa, you blush a little. You are going to ask her out today, I can see it on your face before you got off your bike.”

“Forget the ‘narrator,’ ” Ed puts air quotes around narrator. “You look more like the creepy stalker right now.”

“Awww, don’t feel special,” Amelia condescendingly says. “I have more pictures of other people than you. You’re nothing special, just insignificant like everyone else.” Hey, she stole my line.

“Well you make it sound like you know everything about me.”

“I don’t. I don’t know anything about two third of this volume. I only know what I know in this Ed-centric story. You know more about what’s going on in the book more than me. I just guess and infer.”

“It’s reassuring that I still know more about me than anyone else.”

“No,” Amelia points up. “The narrator knows just as much about you as you, but in different aspect.” If she’s referring to me, then yes. I do know a lot about him.

“Well, God is all knowing.”

“I wasn’t talking about God, just the narrator. Now go on, go to Lisa.”

Ed nods with a smile and heads back to his bike.

“But I do have one request,” Amelia says. “Don’t ever talk to me again, from now on. I am just an extra, not even worthy of a supporting character. I don’t like the attention of being read by people, understand?”
“That is a bad idea. People will find it weird if we suddenly avoid each other. Our socializing should die down slowly and it won’t draw any attention.”

“This will be our dirty little secret,” Amelia says as she takes out a lens cap from her pants pocket and put it on her camera.

“Alright then,” Ed starts to ride off. “See you tomorrow!”

That was interesting… I have no idea what Amelia was talking about. Ed isn’t really thinking about this little incident. He is thinking of how to ask Lisa out the moment he left the alleyway.

Ed passes leaves downtown and is greeted by cookie cutter suburban houses from the seventies. There is hardly any variation between the houses beside the exterior color. This is Lisa’s neighborhood.

Ed parks his bike and walks up to Lisa’s front door. He raises his arms and prepares to knock, but stops for a moment. He is very nervous. This will be the first time he asks anyone out since the start of high school. A few seconds passes and he takes a deep breath.

Knock Knock Knock!

The front door to a pale blue suburban house opens. Lisa, in black cargo pants with metal square studs and a black button up halter neck shirt, greets Ed from behind the doorframe, “Come on in.”

Ed enters, “You look cute today.”

“Aw sweetie, thanks,” Lisa sways side to side with a bit of embarrassment.

“Where are we watching the movie?”

“Up in my room, hon,” Lisa walks up the stair. “Come on up.”

“I couldn’t burn the movie to DVD,” Ed follows, “so I’ll have to hook my laptop to your TV.”

Lisa opens the door to her room. Her room is mostly purple. The curtains on the window are black and so is her bed sheet. There are several *Twilight* posters. One is of Edward creepily staring into your soul and another one is the shirtless Jacob that girls had drooled over. Under the Edward poster is a wooden
dresser with all the *Twilight* books and other fan merchandise lying on top of it.

“Let’s not watch the movie just yet.”

“Why not?” Ed takes off his laptop bag and sets it by Lisa’s bed.

“I bought this,” Lisa takes out a BluRay box set from a shopping bag.

*True Blood.* I see you changed your mind about how vampires are like?”

“What do you mean?” Lisa sits on her bed.

“I heard the *Twilight* crowd doesn’t see eye to eye with the *True Blood* crowd.”

“Why do you dis on *Twilight* so much anyway? You haven’t read any of the books.”

“Um…” Ed hasn’t. He hasn’t read many popular books. Not *Twilight*, not *Harry Potter*, not even the *Lord of the Rings*. He just doesn’t like the violence or war in these stories. Besides non-fictions and funnies, Ed usually read romance or light hearted mystery. *The Time Traveler’s Wife* is one of his favorite books.

“See. Your opinion is invalid!”

“But I’ve seen the first two movies.”

“When?”

“You dragged me to both of them because I lost that bet last year.”

It was a bet about how much the first *Twilight* movie made in its opening week.

“Oh yeah,” Lisa giggles.

“Well, hopefully *True Blood* might change your mind.”

“Honey, no one can ever take me away from my Edward, not even *True Blood,*” Lisa gazes at her Edward poster.

“I hate my name,” Ed complains sarcastically with his head down.

“What?” Lisa jumps up on her bed. “It is a beautiful name.”

“People either associate my name with a certain sparkling vampire or a certain alchemist with prostatic arm and leg.” Ed sits on the carpet.

“Who is the second one?”
“You wouldn’t know. Anime related.”
“I didn’t know you watch anime,” Lisa lays forward on her bed with her head peeking out next to Ed.
“I don’t really. I know a few people who do,” Ed shakes his head. Ashley is one of the people he is talking about.
“You should add one more on your list.”
“Who’s that?”
“Scissorhand.”
“I haven’t seen that one.”
“You should, hon. I really like it.”
Lisa gives him the first disk and Ed gets up to puts the disk into Lisa’s Playstation 3. Her TV is a twenty-four inch LED screen and it’s placed facing her bed. She clicks her remote and starts the series premier.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 08:41 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 12, 2010. 03:41 pm Central Standard Time =
Interstellar non-sovereign space
Tomorrow Never Dies and Wisdom of the Queen rendezvous with each other while both vessels are still in warp. Tomorrow lands in the hanger bay. I can safely say everything is alright now. Other people can worry, but statically, by this point in their mission, nothing should go wrong.
A medical team takes Michelina away on a stretcher in a white and red quarantine box that resemble a coffin but with windows and rushes her to the medical facility. A squad of heavily armed soldiers accompanies the medical team. These soldiers resemble medieval knights but with solid diamond shield and armor instead of flimsy sheets of iron.
“Take care of her,” Faustine says to the head medical officer.
“Glad to have everyone back,” Hayley greets the team on the tarmac.
The team stands in attention.
“Get dress and meet up in my conference room in ten minutes,” she orders.
A few minutes later, the team gathers in the conference room up on the bridge without Michelina. Hayley enters with her shoulder broad and standing tall in her movement and sit down at the end of the conference table.

“Colonel Zahir, explain how you let Sergeant Lombardi run off like this,” Hayley demands from Rashid.

“General Carroll,” Faustine interrupts. “It was my fault. I missed her while I was sniping.”

“No, it was mine. I should have ordered her to stay onboard Tomorrow,” Rashid says. “It was a tactical mistake. This was a standard mission. I never thought there the possibility of something deviating from the norm would be high.”

“It was the damn kid’s own fault,” Leilah says. “…Madam.”

“Madam!” Ed yells but hesitates to continue.

“Yes, Sergeant Alfred?” Hayley asks.

“Why does it matter now? Sorry madam,” he takes a deep breath. “I mean, wouldn’t this be more informative if we wait till Sergeant Lombardi receive a clean medical evaluation and ask her directly?”

“You’re very bold to speak your mind like that,” Hayley says as she stands up from her seat. “I’ll be reviewing all the mission records. Everyone dismiss, we’ll have a formal debriefing when we get back to Earth, that’s if we get the clearance from command to return to Earth.”

After the quick debriefing, the team gathers in the science lab. They are standing in front of a sterile glass wall. Behind the wall is an isolated observation laboratory normally used for studying new life forms and hostile creatures. The lab is three stories tall and about the size of two basketball courts.

Michelina is floating inside a lit up biotank in the middle of the lab. Surrounding her are work consoles and lab equipments from chemistry equipment to a desktop particle accelerator. Several work stations has holographic display of Michelina’s body up and her genetic codes zoomed in very deep. A team of biologists, medical doctors, geneticists, Psyonigists, other types of scientists
studying her, and even a priest and a witch studying her just in case her miraculous recovery wasn’t scientifically caused. Whatever their finding is, I’m sure it won’t be a threat… I hope anyway.

“She is too much trouble for us,” Leilah says. “I want to slit her throat for the stupid things she did today.”

“Can you at least pretend you care?” Ed complaints, “I know you can do that.”

“Are you growing attached to her?” Faustine asks.

“I feel like if she behaves better, she’ll be a nice play thing,” Leilah hugs Faustine from behind and nibbles on one of her ears. “Almost like you.”

Faustine tires to push her away.

“Besides, if she can regenerate her body, I can have so much fun mutilating her and she’ll heal back. No consequences!”

“No consequences?! What happened today will probably scar for life,” Faustine flips Leilah forward and down onto the ground. “And would you show some respect?! We don’t even know what is going on with her.”

“Leilah,” Ed disapprovingly says, “When did you started to include kids as part of your MO?”

“She’s not a kid and you shouldn’t even consider her human.” Leilah explains. “She’s just an experiment by the higher up…”

“Genetic manipulation is banded,” Ed says.

“And you believe them? You believe the people who take advantage of emotional variable kids in order to recruit them? I used to torture and kill mob bosses, drug dealers, and sex traffickers. If I knew what I know now, I would have never joined this organization. I was a freaking saint compared to this. I saved people’s lives and I changed communities. Too bad the Oath last forever and my life will always be secondary from anyone else. Even if I quit today, I can’t go back to making the world a better place. The military police will come dragging me back and extend my life and put me in a floating torture coffin they call a prison for centuries.”

She makes a good point and I’m not going to refute that. Emotional vulnerability is one of the factors, including genetic and
probability of Employees not able to meet each other back on Earth. Ed knows it as well and stays silent.

Sounds of boots echo the corridor leading up to the lab. Kokoro taps them on the shoulders and stands at attention. The rest follows.

“… isn’t that right General?” Leilah continues, “Isn’t she just a lab rat?”

“She doesn’t wear my army’s patch on her shoulder so I wouldn’t know. Ask your bosses in black suit.” Hayley says as she walks pass them and into medical facility. The door slides close but she holds them open. “Sergeant,” She looks at Leilah, “I am a product of their promise for a better world made from my emotional vulnerability. I joined and let them take advantage of me so no one I know will have to suffer the stress of the galaxy. You joined because you’re a selfish bloodlust bitch. See the differences?”

Hayley continues into the lab and the door shuts behind her. Leilah is taking this rather well. She knows Hayley is telling the truth about her.

One of the geneticists comes out and reports they can’t find anything wrong with Michelina. Hayley ignores him and continues towards the biotank. She has always been like this so no one is making a deal out of it.

“I need to talk to Lombardi alone,” Hayley orders everyone to get out of the lab, even the AIs.

Everyone in the room vacates the premise immediately and all the holographic AIs shut down.

“March,” Hayley summons, “polarized the windows, cut all monitoring from the outside, and encrypt your recording of this until I get out.”

“As your command master,” he replies.

“Sergeant,” Hayley stands firmly in front of the biotank.

“Madam,” Unable to speak inside the tank, Michelina replies with a telepathic computer interfaced. “I predicted what you will be saying to me and I would first like to say…”

Hayley cuts her off, “I’m sorry.”
“This is unexpected, madam. Your file and reputation suggests you would not treat me like this. Why are you apologizing?”

Well… I expected something along this line.

“For everything that happened to you today,” Hayley looks away with shame. “I don’t expect your forgiveness but I still want to apologize anyway.”

“It was not your fault,” Michelina comforts with a smile. “I was the one acting unprofessionally.”

“If I didn’t act professionally, you wouldn’t have suffered what you did,” Hayley sniffs. “You suffered the consequences of my action. I don’t want you to suffer more punishment for your actions. I won’t reprimand you or even recommend any action for your superiors to take but the higher ups in your department may say otherwise.”

“I know. Why are you not strict with me like how your reputation says?” Looking from the outside of the sealed lab, people are probably thinking that Hayley is giving Michelina hell right now.

“I should, but this is mostly my fault,” Hayley turns around. “I should have ignored your deployment order and not sent you at all. I’ll deal with my emotional consequences. I just hope this won’t be too much of a traumatic experience to you…”

“I understand…” Michelina nods, “Madam, I recommend you to keep me in quarantine until further study can be done and let me have direct control over a Perfect Holographic Substitute until then.”

“Suggestion noted. I hope you’ll be alright. I’ll see you in final debriefing and if you need anything at all, you can reach me with my personal comm. channel.” Hayley leaves the room.

The scientists and other researchers go back into the lab and back to work.

“Madam,” Ed stands at attention and says.

Hayley ignores him and enters an elevator. Leilah jumps in as the door closes. Ed tires to follow her but the elevator leaves before he can.

For a few floors, they stay silent. Leilah is licking her lips and she pulls out her diamond edge cards. She starts to shuffle them.
Hayley is standing stoically next to Leilah, paying no attention at all. Hayley quietly clears her throat.

…

“General,” Leilah finally breaks the silence with discontent, “Did you know that kid have any sort of healing abilities before the mission?”

“No I didn’t,” Hayley replies.

“Then you sent that missile knowing fully that you would have killed her?”

Hayley nods.

“You’ve heard what I said before. I haven’t killed any Earthling in a very long time and congratulation, General Carroll, you now fit my MO and you are not protected under the Oath. Better yet, the healthcare system here will heal you right up and I can cut you up again and again. I don’t have to kill you to have fun.”

“You are either incredibly hard headed or stupid for threatening me.”

“Yeah I guess I am.” Leilah says with a gleaming smile, “I can’t wait to play with your intestine!” She hits the button for the next floor. “But the waiting game is just as fun. You’ll never know when I’ll hit.”

“Go ahead. I’ve fought ten Rukantee single handedly. You will be a welcome challenge.”

The elevator door opens and Leilah skips out.

“I can’t wait! I haven’t done any prolong torture for a long time and I have to think of lots of new ways to prolong the fun!” Leilah gives Hayley a cheerful wave. “The next time you’ll see me, I’ll be covered in your blood!”

Is Hayley worried? I don’t think so. She as a lot going on and chances are, they’ll won’t see each other again unless she requests the Night Hawks for a mission again. The elevator stops in the officer deck. She enters her quarter, into the bathroom, and takes off her clothes. Her room has a great view of the front of the ship.

Hayley has a scar on the right side of her back and another one just below her right breast. The scars are the source of her health problem. That is where she fell on a toxic dust covered steel rebar
and puncturing her left lung when she was seven, exactly nine years ago today. She also breathed in clouds of toxic smoke from the rubbles from that day and the day before as well.

The bathtub automatically fills up to a nice steamy temperature and Hayley gets in to soak her stress and guilt away, well trying to anyway. Knowing her, it will take a while for her to return to normal. March comes in with a cup of tea for her. Hayley gazes out into the warpfield and sips her tea.

Ed heads up to the bridge and rings the bell to Hayley’s ready room.

“I’m sorry Sergeant, but my master isn’t in her officer right now,” March’s voice says from an intercom.

“Where is she?” Ed asks.

“She doesn’t wish to be disturbed right now.”

Ed knows that means only one thing and he heads back to the elevator for officers’ quarters deck.

“May I ask you what it is you want to discuss with my master?” March appears in the elevator. “I can make an appointment for you.”

Ed ignores him. He is determined to talk to Hayley.

March also appears in Hayley’s room, “Master, Sergeant Alfred is heading here as I speak and refuses to make an appointment. What do you wish me to do?”

“Nothing,” Hayley says as she gets out of the bath and quickly dries herself. “I’ll handle this.”

Both images of March disappear.

DîNG!

That’s the door chime.

Hayley lets Ed in.

Ed comes in and salute, “General.”

“Sergeant, this better be important.”

“I am letting you know I’ll be filing a formal complaint against you for reckless use of a WMD.”

Hayley sits down on a couch and invites Ed to sit next to her. “You know the higher up will not do much with your complaint since I violated the Kandran Neutrality Trade Treaty. Diplomats
will be on my ass for the next month because of this. Why are you
telling me this? It’s not required to inform the person before
complaint.”

“Permission to speak freely madam?” Ed asks.

“Go ahead.”

“I give you that sending in Michelina was out of your hand but
did you think about her when you launched the nuke?”

“Of course, but that is the safest way to contain that biohazard
threat. If I or anyone else devises an alternative plan just to rescue
one person, the time it takes to execute those plans would have
allowed for the Phantoms to escape the planet.”

“You could have let us find an escape vehicle.”

“If your team could have escape, one of those things can too.
Her injuries were worth the sacrifice.”

“Where did your humanity go?!” Ed sadly asks. “How can you
be so cold to even a little kid?!”

“How can I be warm to everyone when I have to worry about
protecting over 6.9 billion people? If I let my feeling interfere with
my command decision, then the safety of Earth would have been at
risk. Remember Our oath. All of Our lives are secondary to any
human being back on Earth. If I have to make sure you or even
Sergeant Lombardi died and never come back in order to protect
Earth, I will pull the trigger myself without any consideration.”

“For God sake! How can you protect humanity when you don’t
have any!?” Ed raises his voice, “What if people knew about Us
and what you do? How will you friends look at you? How will
your parents look at you?”

Hayley quickly swipes a lamp from an end table behind her
and swings it at Ed. He swings his right arm and blocks it.

(FADE)

That is Ed’s right hand being dislocated from his wrist.
The porcelain lamp shatters.
Hayley grabs Ed’s neck with her left hand and picks him up.
“Like you know how my life is!” She yells and throws a hard
punch at Ed’s face. He tries to block it but his left hand becomes
the boxing glove as her fist isn’t being blocked.

Bloody nose and a cracked cheek bone.
She tosses Ed up into the air and kicks him in midair. Ed sees where to block the kick and move is left arm to block but right before impact she moves her leg down, making him miss the block.

**CRACK**
Broken ribs.
Ed hits the wall by the door.
Hayley picks him up by the neck again. “DON’T YOU DARE TALK ABOUT MY FAMILY!”
She drags Ed towards the door.

**Cough cough cough**
She coughs up blood onto Ed’s shirt.
Ed is surprised to see Hayley’s face with blood dripping from her lips and her eyes are on the verge of tears.
She throws him out into the corridor and the door closes.
I’ve never seen her this angry before, but then again, no one ever mentioned her family like this either.

“Are you alright, master?” March appears in front of Hayley.
“I’m fine…” She heads to the bathroom to wash up.

“Are you alright, sir?” March appears next to Ed as he walks to the medical bay. “I deeply apologize for the injuries. My master’s reaction was unexpected.”

“I’m fine…” He says casually. “It’s not your fault. Besides, this is pretty minor compared to some of my past injuries. Is she alright?” Ed looks at the blood on his shirt that was coughed up by Hayley.

“You don’t have to worry about my master. She can handle herself.”

March continues to accompany Ed to the medical bay. Hayley returns to her bath and March sits on the floor next to her just to keep her company. Her nose sniffs and tears start to rain down her cheek yet again. You can hardly blame her for her reaction. She lost her family nine years ago and adding on to it is today’s stress and guilt. She’s human after all, she has her limit on what she can handle.
Back on Earth, Ed and Lisa had just finished watching the first episode of *True Blood*. His heart is still pounding from his nervousness. He still can’t think of a good way to ask her out. Just ask her directly or be a bit more casual? He’s still deciding. Lisa is sitting right next to him on the floor and that isn’t helping him to think clearly either.

“You know sweetie, I don’t remember hearing you ever denying the existence of vampire,” Lisa helps Ed to hook up his laptop with her TV.

“Really?” Ed replies with a smile and opens the folder where the movie is in.

“I’m just curious,” Lisa grabs a bottle of TruBlood from her mini-fridge, “do you actually believe they exist?”

“I don’t doubt the possibility.” Ed doesn’t like to outright lie, so he goes around the question or not tell the whole truth.

“Ooo… Hon, do you want to sweep a vampire girl off her feet like how I want a vampire to sweep me off my feet?” Lisa asks with a singing voice.

“I prefer to stick with human. I don’t like my blood being sucked out,” Ed speaks from experience.

“Sounds like you have experience,” Lisa jokes.

Ed pulls the movie up onto the *VLC Player* and says with a little laugh, “Ready to watch?”

“Let me make some popcorn first!” Lisa hops out of her room for the popcorn.

Ed covers the left side of his neck with his right hand and shivers.
The Grand Ship over the dark side of Earth’s moon

After a formal, yet heated, debriefing filled with explaining and apologizing by Michelina, Ed rushes off for his Civilian life but runs back to Kokoro after seeing a depressed look on her usually cheerful face, “Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Kokoro reassures him. “I just need a good night sleep. Go home.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes I am,” Kokoro jokingly pushes him.

“I can stay up here for you.”

“Niisama, you look like you are in a rush. What do you need to?”

“I’m going to ask this girl out…” Ed shyly says.

“Well go! I’m not that important compared to love.”

“Alright then, take care,” Ed runs off.

“You’ll win her heart!” Kokoro yells and waves.

After making sure Ed is out of her field of view, Kokoro takes a train to a mountainous district in The City. The Psychionic institute she used to go on a weekly base is there. After exiting the train she waddles to the place without energy. What supposed to be a ten minute walk from the train station is taking about thirty minutes. There, Kokoro waits in the waiting room with her lips trembles and hands shaking, she holds her tears in, and waits for her psychologist and Psyonigist. My poor child is going to relive hell of her ancestors again. She was doing so well too.

Ed jumps out of the train in his district. He is excited to go back home to ask Lisa out, but he just can’t feel the usual level of excitement of going home today. I feel like he wants to think of nothing but Lisa, but what happened today must be lingering in his head.

On his way back to his dorm, Ed runs into Opheliah.

They greet each other.

“Something is weird…” Ed says and keeps walking towards his dorm.
“What is?” Ophelia asks and walks with him.
“I just got off from a mission and you don’t have that hungry look.” Ed is expecting her to tease him about his blood which she is fond of. I too am expecting that.
“Oh, the nanobots taint the flavours of your blood stream. How was your mission? You suffered broken ribs and cheek.”
“I’m fine… And those weren’t from the mission. Those were from General Carroll.”
“That fine lassie does possess temper of a serpent but heart of an angel.”
“I hardly would call someone willing to nuke a child with no qualms having heart of an angel,” Ed grumpily says.
“Nuking a child? She mustn’t have alternative choices. Place your faith in my words. Her heart is soaked in sorrow and it will eat at her sanity for weeks to come.”
“How do you know that’ll happen?”
“You mustn’t speak of what I am about to divulge to any souls. Do you give me your words?” Ophelia sticks out her pinky.
“I promise,” Ed takes the pinky promise.
“Her cold exterior is but a mere façade. Her heart is heavy with guilt and regret. She longs for the warmth of family for comfort from the stress of her obligation but Saint Peter greeted them much too early. She often seeks me out for counsel hoping my wisdom in my ages of loneliness can shed light on ways to search out serenity for her lonely soul.”
“That will explain why she freaked out when I mentioned her family…” Ed pauses. “Ophelia, you might be the only one who can answer this question since you’ve been here forever…”
“Oh!” Ophelia cuts him off. “You sir are no gentleman! How dare you speak ill on the status of my youthfulness?”
“What? I’ve always called you old.”
Ophelia face-palms herself, “The quality of my humour still contains much latency between your generation and myself. Your mood is gloomy so I endeavored to bring up your spirit. Please continue with your inquiry.”
After all these years, Ophelia is still playing catch up. She is behind with culture, her humor is at a nineteenth century level, her
chose of fashion is Victorian, and she uses a wireless rotary phone as her cellphone.

Ed chuckles a little but become serious again. “The newest member of my team is eight. When you were younger was there any battle field deployment of children?”

“The standard field deployment age when I was recruited was ten.”


“It is with great luck and blessing for most men to live exceeding the age of thirty. The Black Death only plunges that statistic into oblivion. If I wasn’t forsaken with this curse of vampirism, I would have died from the Black Death as well. The recruitment age was six and retirement age was twenty. Ah yes, time indeed has brought forth progress in cultures and science but I do not object to your little colleague’s deployment.”

“Why not? We have treaties preventing usage of child soldiers back on Earth. Child soldiers has been accepted as one of the greatest wrong there is.”

“Little Edward, you are excessively optimistic, it is a wondrous thing. Yet you must realize even the new colleague of yours is fighting in a noble fight. Being a child soldier with Us fighting for humanity and attempting to slowly improve it is a noble thing to do compared to being a child soldier or a regular soldier on Earth. These poor souls are forced to fight or fight for petty issues such as territories or national pride.”

“Are you saying it is better to be a child soldier up here than down on Earth?”

“Exactly! You take pleasure in the lavishness of the modern first world but in my youth and for many souls of the modern world, our Employment is a luxury which all the gold in the world cannot afford.”

“But…”

“But nothing!” Ophelia looks up at Ed with a disapproving look. “I enjoyed the luxury of being a woman with the rights of men centuries before others on Earth. Women who shroud their face to shun the lustful gazes of men can shed their shrouds up here fearing no judgment. Children who cannot afford tuition can
learn the wisdom of Aristotle or Einstein. I am treated as a human being here while even my colleagues and friends in the Vatican and Church of England still view me as monsters.”

“I get it,” Ed says and stops in front of his dorm. “I’m a first world brat.”

“Oh you’re not. My perspective of a wrinkleless ancient woman is too dissimilar to young man such as yourself. Go home,” She points to his dorm, “You mustn’t keep the one resides in your hearts waiting if you wish to woo her.”

Ed jumps back a little, “How did you know?”

“Blood tells many stories of a man, even stories not known to himself. May Cupid’s arrow pierce you and her hearts.”

Ed smiles and gives Ophelia a hug, “Thanks and you are an angel not a monster.”

Ophelia smiles and they say good bye. I doubt Ed will change his mind but at least he understands other people’s point of view. Talking about it seems to help with his mood. The smile on his face is getting bigger with each step he takes towards his dorm.

= Sept. 12, 2010. 11:34 pm Greenwich Mean Time =
= Sept. 12, 2010. 06:34 pm Central Standard Time =

Ed and Lisa are finished with the movie back down on Earth. Ed offers to take the empty pop bottles and the empty bag of popcorn downstairs from Lisa’s room. This is just an offer for help but the real Ed takes this opportunity to beam back down during this little excuse.

Right on time. Yet Ed is uneasy now. The stress from his work life is adding on to the romantic jitteriness of his normal life.

“Honey, you are going to be late for supper,” Lisa says as Ed returns to her room and his heart beats ever so fast. His face is slowly flushing red.

“My mom would have called already if she is about to finish cooking,” Ed starts to pack up his laptop.

“We should hang out some other day to watch more True Blood!”
“That would be fun.” blush
Silence.
“Lisa, I think you are cute, funny, and a wonderful person to be around with,” Ed starts to blush.
Lisa’s face turns red, “Sweetie, you are fun to be around with too.”
Ed’s heart beats faster, seemingly to be faster than it was during mission. “I want to be your boyfriend.”
Surprise!
Lisa is lost for words. She blushes as she tries to figure out what she’s going to say.
A few seconds passes with Lisa looking around to search for words and Ed looking deeply into her eyes. The room is awkwardly silent and the temperature is seemingly rising, but it’s not. They both are feeling the room is getting hot because they are blushing and nervous and a bit embarrassed.
“Sweetie, you know, I always fantasize about how someone will sweep me off my feet and love me,” Lisa looks Ed in the eyes. “But dreaming about having a relationship is one thing. We’re both still young. You’re a wonderful person and a great friend, but you might be ready for a relationship, but I’m just not ready.”
Ed’s heart cracks and hides his emotion, as usual, only this time from disappointment of life rather than stressful sadness of work.
“I’m sorry swee...” Lisa stops herself from finishing the word ‘sweetie.’
“No, I understand. I am not ready either,” Ed speaks a lie, unusual for him. “I just wanted so share my feeling and see how you feel about it.”
“Stay friends for now?” Lisa asks.
“Yeah,” Ed says and starts to head downstairs.
“See you in school tomorrow!” Lisa walks him out the front door.
“Later,” Ed waves goodbye and walks out of Lisa’s house.

Ed hops on his bike and rides off slowly into the late afternoon sun with his heart eroding away in disappointment.
It is amazing how much he can endure. He doesn’t deserve this heart break. He faced demons and flames of hell, witness unbearable pain and agonizing memory of others. Never once did he ask for anything in return. No fame or glory, he doesn’t even want to be thanked. It is too much to ask for to have someone to love him?

Chapter Seven: An Uneasy Heart
Epilogue

After the Phantom incident, our intelligence listening in on Rukantee chatters has determined they know nothing of our involvement with the Phantom incident even though Ed’s helmet cam did record Rukantee special forces talking about them after the missile strike.

The incident has lead to some arguments in the high commands on the problem with Michelina’s deployment because of her action. One thing is clear with her, she has a clean bill of health, her Psych Category has been raised to an A, but she received a demotion. Her view of herself as a soldier is damaged but is still intact. The generals in the Intelligence department wanted to kick her of the team but I stopped them doing that. She is just too valuable to be left unused and I’ve invested too much effort into her to let her go to waste.

What is the line from that popular science fiction movie?

A stallion must first be broken before it can reach its potential.

Kokoro, however, is not doing too well. She is starting to see her therapists again to help with her problem with her trauma. Her nightmare has started again, even back home. If her flashbacks start to disrupt her lives, we might have put her on mental disrupting nanobots to suppress this unfortunate ability. However, that type of medical treatment will disrupt all of her other positive and mission supportive abilities as well.

The very next morning after the mission and Ed’s rejection, another school day begins. He is putting on a fake smile as usual. People are not noticing him as much as a normal day. Remember what I said about how it’s harder for Ed to be noticed by people when he is depressed? Several students and even a teacher have bumped into him when he was entering the school.
Ed asks in school while leaning against a locker door, “What does it mean when a girl says she is not ready to be in a relationship?”

Amelia jumps a little, either surprised to see that Ed is not avoiding her because of what she did to him on Saturday or she just didn’t notice him before, “I wouldn’t know. I always say no whenever anyone asks me out.”

“Really?” Ed surprised to hear that, “I just thought you just didn’t like that bro who asked you out last year.”

“Nope, that douche isn’t anything special, everyone is a big NO,” she spells it out.

They walk to different classes in the same general direction together.

“So, Lisa rejected you?” Amelia asks. “I’m not surprised.”

“Thanks for the comfort,” Ed sarcastically replies.

“I aim to please. But truth be told, I knew she is going to reject you.”

“What?”

“Girls are better at reading emotion, even if we don’t know it. Lisa is very good at it. Why would she want to go out with someone who is always bitter?”

“Again with the bitter…” Ed sighs.

“You’re bitter right now but not because of being rejected. That is all I know, if you want relationship advice, ask Ashley.”

“What? No.”

“You two do know each other much better and I’m sure she has more experience with people trying to ask her out.”

“It’s embarrassing. She always makes fun of how I can’t get a girlfriend or how I blush too easily.”

Amelia laughs under her breath. “You are a little pathetic.”

“So are you…”

“Don’t feel bad. You are pathetic but most people think you are a nice guy. I feel like most girls think of you very highly. I think you are a nice guy but to the point of being an idiot.”

“How does that me being nice make me an idiot?”

“You are still so friendly even after what I did to you yesterday and may I remind you that I might do it again if you do something
I don’t like again. Everyone pretends I don’t exist after I do that. I like it that way.”

“T’m not your first?” Ed surpassingly asks.

“Don’t make it sound like you are someone special,” Amelia says while placing her right hand over her heart. She isn’t exaggerating. According to sensor records, what happened between her and Ed has happen between her and other people before.

“No, I’m just a little worry about you now…”

“Anyway you really shouldn’t ask me about relationship. Go ask Ashley instead. A lot of guys have a thing for her.”

“Not too many people ask her out and I don’t really know how she thinks about relationships.”

“Really?” Amelia is a bit surprised, “She’s one of the best cheerleaders and hot too. How is it that not many people ask her out?”

“I think she’s a bit weird for most guys.”

“I guess hiding inside people’s lockers and in cardboard boxes is a bit weird. And not too many girls are into sword fighting either.”

“I didn’t you know her this well.”

“Like I said, a picture is worth a thousand words. Also I’m on the year book committee as well, so I know a lot about many people.”

“The biggest problem with both of you is that many people think you and Ashley are going out.”

“What?!” You can’t really blame her or anyone for thinking that. Ed and Ashley are really close. They go see movies together. Ashley takes Ed underwear shopping and to the nail salon. Ed takes Ashley LEGO shopping and to planetarium shows. They spent the night at each other’s houses all the time.

“That’s probably why not too many guys are willing to ask her out and girls may be hesitant to go out with you.”

“But we are not.”

“Even I thought you have a thing for her.”

“She’s more like a sister than anything.”

200
“That aside, if you really like that girl, then waits for her to be ready and ask her again. The homecoming dance is coming up in the next volume. That might be a good time. Ask her to be your date.”

“I think I’ll do that.” Ed says and becomes irritated, “And will you stop breaking the fourth wall, it is getting annoying.”

“I do what I want!”

They don’t say anything for a few seconds. Ed is enjoying this little moment, even with his bitterness. He usually doesn’t share anything about his emotion here on Earth. He locks it away so it doesn’t bother anyone else and so no one will worry about him, but today, he is opening up for some reason. He needs it. He’s been bottling up the weight of the galaxy for too long.

“It’ll be difficult for you. You’ll need to have genuine emotion, not that fake smile you have on right now.”

“What about you?” Ed asks, “You are hiding with a fake smile too.”

“Oh…” Amelia tilts her head. She must be surprised that Ed can see through her fake smile. “It’s true, this is fake, but I’m not looking for a relationship now aren’t I? You, no one likes a faker.”

Ed smiles a little as his shattered heart begins to heal and he becomes a bit more optimistic. He still has a chance but it’ll be a challenge for him to sort out his emotion. He might be adaptable between work and life but things he sees in his job would have a toll on anyone. To truly separate his normal life and professional life is impossible.

I wish he can find happiness. It is something out of my control but I deeply want to give him happiness and someone to love. Unfortunately this is reality, and not like what Amelia said, a work of fiction. No one can morph into a super hero and return to normal after battles. No one can save everyone. There is no happy ending after each story. The good never win every time and there is no definite protagonist or antagonist. There is no reset after each episode. There is no unlimited respond or checkpoint. If I am a narrator, then I am a useless one. All I can do to watch over but
cannot intervene directly. The only thing I can do is to wish and
dream that Ed and everyone I care for continue to wish and dream.

Epilogue: Dreams
The James Franklin High School Student Council cordially invites you to a night of wonderful memories filled with dancing and fine music in the William Clinton High School’s Homecoming Dance: A Renaissance Venetian Carnevale.

Hear this, my fellow humans! Listen to reason. This regime must be taken down! For too long, have they been puppets to those Earthlings. Those Earthlings call us equals, but all they do is dragging us into wars that only benefit them and raping our beautiful planet for her resources. Stand together with us, my fellow humans of Kelessia. We Kelessinite will be slave to the Earthlings no more. We shall take down this government and start a new one for the people of Kelesia and by the people of Kelessia and no one else! We are the True Voice of Kelessia.

Hello all,

I moved out of the orphanage and have found my own place by the Grand River. Since it is somewhat customary to invite guests and display a new home, I am throwing a small party at my new resident. There will be food and drinks, but feel free to bring some snacks and drinks.

Michelina Lombardi