

À la lumière de l'amour de ma mère

by meiri/Creatorial

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Rating:

Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings:

N/A

Category:

Gen

Fandom:

Metal Gear Solid

Relationship:

Otacon & Dr. Strangelove

Otacon & Solid Snake

The Boss & Dr. Strangelove

Character:

Hal "Otacon" Emmerich

Dr. Strangelove

Solid Snake

The Boss

Mammal Pod

Additional Tags:

no "Snake/Otacon" tag as it is mostly readable as platonic but BOY we are TOEING that line it's still Philanthropy Days so they live together (and you can guess what that entails)

HEAVILY Implied/At This Point More Or Less Canon Strangelove/The Boss

i did not put it as a relationship tag because it isn't the focus of the story—still there though Grief/Mourning

Canonical Character Death

Family Feels

Family Secrets

you know what happened to Strangelove you can piece together what I mean

vague references to Otacon's past/childhood as told in MGS2

Artificial Intelligence

Ghost In The Machine (Literal), Ghosts... In General?
Seemingly Alive Supposed-Conscienceless Technology
Meeting Mom (but messed up)
Meeting Mom's GF (but messed up)
Lucid Dreaming, Dream Visits
The Author Has Little Knowledge of 70s Technology
I Would Assume This Is Not How Most Of This Works
This Is Likely Not How You'd Retrieve Information From The AI Pod But I Never Tried So I Can't Know.

Summary

"The strange, cylindrical shell had come to them with an eight-inch floppy diskette. Snake liked to hold it up and look through the central circle, observing Otacon across the room. It was labelled with a simple white tag: a string of incomprehensible numbers, a year, a location that had been written over a few times, and, in a dulling red ink, the words 'BS-Imago'."

Hal gets possession of the Mammal Pod. The memory boards only wait for him to pull them out.

Chapters: 5

Notes

This takes place somewhere between the end of events of MGS2 and them getting Sunny. The whole thing contains spoilers for MGSPW and MGSVTPP (especially Strangelove's tapes on both) and necessitates to have at least vague knowledge of these to understand.

The Mother Shell

She stood almost nine feet tall, a silent, sleek monolith.

She looked out of place in the storage unit they were renting, hidden somewhere in the beating heart of the city, but, if we were being honest, she would look out of place everywhere else.

The concrete walls muffled the world around, cradling her—and Hal, who didn't dare to stand, and had to kneel—in a cold, grey, tranquil cocoon. He hadn't found the strength to turn on the fluorescent lights overhead. Engulfed, still, in a contemplative, almost pious silence, he kept his eyes on her; on her black, slick reptilian shell.

She had rust here and there, making her seem blood-stained. The great big eye under her crown of neons (which, he assumed, would light up eventually) looked almost familiar.

Hal pulled himself on his knees and crawled a foot forward. He sat back on his heels and kept a shy, reverent distance.

Eventually, he reached out a hand, expecting electricity or radiation to paralyze him in the spot—but neither came. He grazed the shell with his fingertips, not daring more. It had the barest of hint of texture; like pores, like goosebumps.

“Do you want me to leave?” asked Snake. He had stayed back a respectful few feet. Feigned nonchalance cocked his silhouette as he leaned his back against a concrete wall, but he mostly felt uneasy. He had never been good with family reunions, especially not his own. This time was only different because the cold, emotionless family member Otacon was talking to couldn't reply.

Hal barely looked at him over his shoulder, as if not daring to fully tear his gaze. He answered: “No... it's fine. We're not staying much longer anyways.”

Snake noted how he phrased it. As if too much guilt would weigh on his bony shoulders if he implied he'd be the only one to leave. The monolith couldn't hear him, or at least Snake didn't think it could, but he still noticed how Otacon walked around his words when in range of its perceived ears.

Eventually, Hal took a step back. He first withdrew his knees to his chest, bowing his head, and pulled himself on his legs. He carefully kept his eyes off the monolith as he turned on his heels and walked up to Snake where he was waiting for him.

“We're leaving?”

“Yeah. I have to bring my things in here before I can do anything.”

“What are you planning to do?”

Otacon shrugged as he pried open the door of the storage unit. “I'll see. I don't think I can crack it open.”

“But if you could?”

Otacon fell silent. Played mindlessly with the keys in his hand until it smelled of rust. “... I'll see.”

The monolith had come to them with an eight-inch floppy diskette. Snake liked to hold it up and look through the central circle, observing Otacon across the room. It was labeled with a simple white tag: a string of incomprehensible numbers, a year, a location that had been written over a

few times, and, in a dulling red ink, the words “BS-Imago”.

The sealed envelope it had come in bore the words “Thought you might want to know.”

David recognized the handwriting without ever really. It ate him up inside when he read.

Otacon had ferreted out a disk drive from some guy. He didn't really seem to understand the weight and history of the thing because he sold it to Otacon for twenty bucks and two spare tires (that they didn't need anymore because they had ditched the escape car already). Snake had gone to pick the package up—he was the least recognizable of the two with his newly-dyed auburn hair.

“The write-protect notch is taped,” Otacon had noted when he first held the diskette in his hands.

“It was taped a few times over. Someone wanted to keep everything that's on this thing *safe*.”

Snake didn't really understand how these two parts of his sentence correlated, but after all, his knowledge of computer science was quite limited.

Otacon's corner of the room looked like a minefield, Snake unable to stride across and having to very carefully avoid a bunch of computer parts discarded on the floor. It reminded him faintly of a seafood market where the fish would be gutted and their insides tipped on the slippery ground. He didn't ever recall going to a seafood market.

“Any luck?” he eventually asked when he had enough of standing in the entryway.

Otacon tilted his head towards him as if to catch his words better before promptly cocking it back straight on his shoulders, leaning towards his screen. “I'm just setting it up. I'm having trouble getting my computer to recognize the hardware, it's probably because it's just old.”

“But you'll get there?”

Otacon snorted out a hearty chuckle. “Yeah. Yeah, I'll get there.”

Hal's eyes ran from line to line, break to break. Some of it was comprehensible to David, who watched the screen alongside him, his chair flanking Otacon's by the long-legged table they made his computer desk; the rest was unintelligible programspeak. Otacon didn't seem to have a single issue following the clunky, obsolete characters stretching in lines across the monitor.

When Snake inquired about it, he simply responded: “It's old for sure, but I can still understand it. A lot of this language survived to this day, you just have to have an eye for it.”

“Which you do,” added Snake. Maybe he meant it as a question, but his flat, matter-of-fact tone betrayed him (he simply knew). Otacon’s mouth quirked in an almost prideful smile.

He wandered through the jungle of data, line after line like one would go trench after trench. Worry ate at his eyes (they widened surreptitiously). The light grew harsher and harsher as the sun set. Eventually, Snake slipped off his chair and got them takeout.

“How are things going?” Snake asked over Hal’s hunched shoulders. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t spoken since he had gotten his computer to read the diskette.

Otacon’s back suddenly straightened and he twisted on his chair. Snake could see he was sitting on it with his legs crossed again. He sighed, already expecting Hal to complain and whine about backache for the next few days.

“Well,” Otacon started, the resignation in his voice betraying his already setting-in exhaustion, “there is a lot of data. More than I expected, in fact.”

Snake walked to his desk and picked up an empty box that previously contained a hearty serving of Pad Thai.

“A lot of it seems to be, uh, filler data,” Otacon continued. “To make it harder to extract the actual data. Whoever wrote this *really* wanted to keep it safe.”

Hal reached for a few lines on the screen with a bony finger.

“I can still read it. Once you find which parts can be discarded, it’s easy to navigate through.”

“Found anything of interest?” Snake asked, following the finger across the pixels.

Otacon readjusted his glasses, his hand twitching with a nervous tic that Snake started to know well—it’s not quite *fear*, but it’s damn close.

“Dates, a lot. Years. Some lines seemed to be used to record milestones in whatever project this was. Some notes of corrections made. Initials...”

He pointed. Snake leaned in.

“‘SL’?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyone you know?”

Otacon shook his head.

“I don’t even know if it’s supposed to be a first and last name, in what order, if it’s something completely different...”

Otacon scrolled up and down to further his point, showing Snake every instance of the two letters he could find.

“Why does it appear so often?”

Otacon glanced at him sideways—a wide, insectoid eye finding his partner from under the temples of his glasses, a quirk of his that Snake had learned to appreciate. A nervous chuckle whistled past his lips.

“Well, computer scientists—programmers, coders, engineers—we tend to... be proud of what we make.” He mindlessly and pointlessly moved the mouse around, fingers sending it from one side of his grasp to the other. “My name is somewhere on everything I’ve written for REX. The blueprints, the sketches, the codes. This nuclear annihilation machine has the Emmerich seal on it.” He fidgeted, shook as if ran through by a current. “... It wouldn’t be the first one, anyway.”

Snake shot him a glance that cut his self-flagellating short, his insistent, sharp eyes encouraging him to continue:

“It’s mostly directives. There are a few very elaborate commands in here that I do not think a *computer* could execute. Some lines read more like...” He scrolled up, down, re-read. “Well. You wouldn’t talk to a computer like that.”

“Like what?”

“Well...”

Snake watched Otacon rummage through inked pages of a notepad, bent and crumpled from how long he’d had it, and push under the desktop light some freshly-smearred lines of writing. Snake squinted. Otacon was illegible. The stress showed through how tight he looped his o’s and a’s, how sharp he cut his i’s.

“... Some parts just read like a love letter.”

They kept silent. The floppy drive purred restlessly, Otacon's computer tower snored. He fidgeted with the pages of his notepad, growing increasingly uncomfortable as Snake read and re-read his notes. Maybe he shouldn't be showing that, he thought. Maybe he shouldn't be *reading* that. He didn't know who these lines were addressed to, but he knew they weren't meant to be read in clunky and awkward pixels on a 2006 LCD monitor.

He didn't want to think the square, bendy floppy was a Pandora's box. Nothing in here read like a curse, but then again, he thought, they just seemed to find him anyway.

Eventually, Snake's voice slipped over the purr of the hardware.

"What do you think is in there?"

He didn't specify where.

Hal shrugged, not asking for specification, not specifying.

He scraped with a mindless nail the ink setting in the creases and pores of his hand.

"*It looks like blood in his low light,*" he thought. He promptly swallowed that back and closed his fists, hoping to crush the mental image in them.

Umbilical

Otacon pried the door of the storage unit open in the early morning.

It was damn cold outside and colder between the concrete walls—he didn't know if this cold was better for the monolith than the heat, if the monolith would start suffering from extreme temperatures, he didn't know much.

"Hello," he said when he stepped in. His voice cracked. The shell's big round eye stayed its usual black and grey, reflecting from feet away Otacon's distorted, lanky silhouette on its smooth cornea. Of course, he didn't get a reply.

His steps were more shy than measured, he lied to himself and said he simply was being careful. He undid the straps of his backpack and shed its weight—he kept a careful, anxious eye on the great black shell, as if it could jolt alive at any moment (as far as he knew, it could). He pulled his laptop out, put the pouch he carried it in on the ground, and set it there. He shed his coat and spread it as a seat. The cold was giving him goosebumps and he prayed for the mid-morning warmth to crawl in quickly.

He had no idea where to go from there.

He had read about memory boards, control drives, mobility, sensory drives. He had read about a

hatch.

He had read of data overwritten with someone else's voice.

It made sense and didn't. He let himself fall on his coat—it didn't cushion his fall as much as he thought it would and he winced.

Snake's head popped in around midday.

"How's it going?"

Otacon didn't actually have a response. He stared at Snake until he realized he probably looked like an idiot with his mouth open to say nothing, and closed it. Opened it again:

"Well, I, uh, haven't done much so far. I'm going through what I know over and over. I want to be sure I can salvage whatever's in there."

Fear gnawed at him. Snake could hear it. His throat closed in on his words like the walls of a haunted house.

"What do you think you'll find?" Snake asked, and immediately cursed himself for it. He watched Hal's eyes flicker around, his jaw move as he looked for his words and tried to keep something at bay.

"I don't really know. From what I've read, there should be memory boards in it, I assume detachable modules." He scrolled through his notes as if he was trying to buy himself time. "It's just..."

Snake saw him shift his weight around, crossing and uncrossing his legs. He was visibly unnerved.

"... A lot of things can go wrong", Hal eventually continued.

He didn't add anything else. Snake walked to him, crossed his legs on the cold floors and, leaning forward, wordlessly asked Otacon to talk him through it—the simplest, easiest way they had both found to pull each other out of spirals and maelstroms of unwanted thoughts, which they had to deal with as often as decades of unspoken, unspeakable things were thrown in their faces.

Kept away from the darkest paths his mind could have taken (a regular occurrence) by a stoic, strangely empathetic down-to-earth David, Hal had been advised to start simple: learn about the shell. He had balanced on his heels, knees, and pulled himself up, shaking his legs around to get rid of the pins and needles that had settled in during his uncomfortable sitting reflection.

The storage unit had considerably warmed up in the hours he spent putting approaching the shell off. Taking steps towards it—her—he watched his silhouette grow, twist, turn on the smooth metal of the outside coat. Looking at himself in the opaque mirror of the monolith, at his gawky legs, at the ridiculous shape of his coat he had tied around his hips, kept his mind of what was, what could be inside. Every step he took towards her was a step his mind took back. When they came face to face, the shell radiated a biting, shocking cold. Otacon shivered through and through.

He thought it would have been scarier, being this close to it. The day prior, he hadn't dared even coming within an arm's reach, afraid maybe the lifeless, motionless cylinder would have grown arms and pulled him inside.

"*Jesus Christ, Emmerich,*" he promptly chastised himself as the particularly horrific thought ran through him, "*get it together.*"

There was a lot, yet not much to see at the same time. Putting his hand on the shell, it didn't feel as textured, as skin-like as it had the day prior. That can only be good, he thought. The pod had two sets of four neons, one encircling its crown and one encircling its base. They were a dull dark grey, a bit dirty from years of neglect, but Otacon knew they'd light up. The pod was also flanked, at the top, of a small, grey tower; on its side, of what Otacon assumed were pressure or air regulators, 6 small holes arranged twice in vertical lines on each side of the eye. A hatch on the side.

Otacon walked up to inspect it closely. The door fit with no protuberance into the flank of the shell, only noticeable by the small gaps it left on each side. A panel next to it looked to be in control of opening and closing.

A finger grazed it. Otacon stepped aside just in case it flew open, pressed the button with a certain restraint. Nothing. He pushed again, harder. Nothing still.

A sigh escaped him, torn between relief and frustration, and he examined the door further.

An unsteady line was carved in the metal close to the aperture, seemed to dig in.

Someone had tried to pry the hatch door open.

Otacon's throat closed in, reminiscent of a mean allergic reaction. His lower jaw fell as nausea brewed in the back of his mouth. Someone had tried to pry the hatch door open, and they very well might have succeeded.

“I’m starting to think you won’t be able to do anything with this thing unless it’s powered up,” Snake’s voice hit him from the other side of the monolith, promptly pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Huh?” was all he could manage.

“There’s an outlet right there,” Snake elaborated, furthering his point by giving two kicks to the base right next to it. “This thing’s been left alone for years so I’d assume it needs a good charging-up.”

Hal found himself gently patting the smooth black shell, as if to make up for the kick it just got to the feet, and promptly interrupted himself. “I just tried to open the door and nothing happened,” he told Snake, “you’re making sense. We should try again when it’s charged.”

“I don’t think we have an electrical cord long enough to reach the power outlet, I’d need to bring the extension cable.”

Suddenly, they were back to mundanity, to the simple things. Hal noted how Snake offered to stay around and help with the pod. His lips quirked in a smile. He both hoped Snake would allow him to stay alone with this thing, close the door on the cold, grey unit, and would never leave. He also knew Snake wouldn’t hear anything he didn’t like. Otacon decided he’d let him do whatever.

They spent some more time examining the pod. It seemed to grow bigger, and yet fall considerably less spooky with each detail Hal noticed. It didn’t look intricate or complicated from the outside, but knowing the data it ran on, Otacon knew the inside was going to be a doozy. He had no idea what the “memory boards” were going to look like, if they were removable, if they were salvageable, if there was a mechanism put in place to prevent this very act—if he truly could, if he truly *wanted*.

Dirt stained his hand and was brushed away, rust stayed.

“Did you see that?”

“Huh?”

“The pictures.”

Otacon circled the shell to Snake's side. His step was unsteady. He walked on the edge of his foot and almost twisted his ankle. Snake was taking a few steps to allow him a better view. He pointed, and Hal followed his finger.

A collage. The pictures were washed out, brightened by exposure to the sun, but still legible. Hal's heart dropped to the pit of his stomach and he felt his intestines furiously twist, wringing a choked breath out of him.

He was here.

That wasn't the weirdest thing.

He was held.

His head was a round, pale and chubby apple stuck on tiny shoulders. His bright, if bug-like eyes stared at the camera behind flimsy glasses he remembered having, so, so long ago. A keen smile missing teeth dug into his full, rosy cheeks. He was waving with the tiniest hand, chubby baby fingers spread from his palm.

The woman holding him was mom.

There was no doubt possible, no doubt even allowed. That was mom. He tried to speak the word and it couldn't come out.

He reached out long, bony fingers (god, how much they had changed) to touch the photograph; it was rough where the paper had flaked off, a smooth mat finish under his fingertips where it had held up. He traced the silver hair that came back to him in flashes, lost and disorganized fragments he would have to piece together (another time, another time); the arms looped around his tiny body.

Even when he tore his gaze away, he really didn't. He followed himself with his own eyes. Mom didn't move. He couldn't decide if that was more or less unnerving.

"Is that...?" He asked, pointing at something, someone else in the patchwork of photographs. From the way David's brow furrowed, his lip firmly twitching and rising on his teeth, Hal had his answer.

"Big Boss."

"I had guessed."

"Yeah." Cold and sharp. Otacon dropped the subject.

Snake made the trip home and back, brought the extension cord.

“Do you want me to stay?” he asked.

Otacon weighted his answer. The pod could come alive. He could be scared shitless. He didn't know if he preferred Snake to be there or not for his freakout.

On one hand, it felt deeply personal, almost intimate to stay alongside the silent, still monolith, and he would like to keep Snake out of this unsettlingly familiar bubble—he also really didn't want to cry, because he felt the tears already coming, in front of him.

On the other, he didn't know what the pod could *do*. It had no conscience, or at least he thought, but it still instilled in him a bones-deep, marrow-icing fear. Both because it didn't talk, or think, or know, or so he thought, and because, maybe it could. He felt like he was standing in this room next to a ticking bomb, and Snake was a way better explosive-handler than he was.

“I'm good,” Otacon still said, the words running faster than his thoughts (which was quite a feat in itself). “I'll just check stuff on my laptop while I'm here. You'd get bored.”

“Alright. Do you want me to bring you dinner?”

“I'd like that. Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

And he was on his way.

Otacon plugged the cord in the outlet carefully crafted at the base of the shell. He expected it to jolt awake in a mechanical roar, blinding red lights bursting from it, but it didn't: a dim, soft red glow grew from the first circle of neons on each pair and the pod awoke with the simple, low rumble Otacon knew from his older computers. A familiar, soothing purr. It vibrated with the harmless, constant background noise of a small fridge.

Hal was almost disappointed.

He adjusted himself on his coat he used as a seat and leaned towards his screen. His back was already hurting but he pretended it was fine—he didn't want to get up, he didn't want to turn around.

The red light had grown deeper, brighter with each neon lighting up, cradling him in a rosy hue. Despite the warm, comfortable tint of the usually grey walls, the room was growing colder. The pod seemed to rock and tremble, agitated by a whirr that, with each passing minute, started to sound more and more like breaths. Frost seemed to seep into the self-contained microcosm of the storage unit with waves—an exhalation, an inhalation, an exhalation...

Hal was freezing. He slipped his coat back on, felt the sharp bite of air on his waist when his t-shirt bunched up.

It felt like it was breathing right into his neck. He hunched over his laptop even more, bowing down, hoping the air would roll over the curve of his back and he'd be less cold.

The last two neon rings powered up and the rumbling stopped. A second of silence held still where Otacon turned to the pod, and suddenly the room was hit with a heatwave as the shell came to life with a loud, mechanical hammering. Otacon flipped on his legs, promptly facing the shell as his heartbeat picked up, held himself on his hands behind his back as he lost his balance in his seat. He could see the pod sway ever so slightly on its base as if whatever hardware was inside moved and squirmed around. *Thud-thud-thud*, he could hear, and it sounded awfully like someone knocking on the inside until he realized that was his own pulse, growing louder than the roar with which the machine rocked and moved.

It seemed to convulse. It seemed to cough. It seemed to fight. It settled, suddenly straight on its base, its smooth black coat swallowing the red lights it was crowned in and regurgitating them in a deep dark crimson—monolithic, it was monolithic in its purest, rawest form, purest shape, and Hal was struck square in the chest. He crawled back, arms suddenly weak and giving in. He hit the ground on his elbow and didn't even make a sound. Chin buried into his own chest, he watched the big round eye snap open, red and bright and staring at him, staring directly at him. He was a deer caught in headlights. The sudden sharpness of the light pierced him right through the stomach as he thought to kick his legs and crawl backward, only to find himself completely immobile, as if paralyzed.

The eye watched him, a sharp gold nestled in a vivid red nestled in burgundy nestled in black and circled by silver, a familiar, so familiar sight he couldn't put a word, a thought on it—he couldn't think.

Its iris tightened, widened, taking in his pathetically sprawled, terrified silhouette stuck mid-escape, observing him coldly.

He opened his mouth, wanting a word, not finding it in time and, with a flash of red, it—*she* spoke to him:

“Hal?”

His already-open mouth fell lower, his jaw aching with a sudden shot of horror.

There was in her single word a hint of haughtiness only dropped for the present moment, in the shape of the name as it came out of the mouth an accent he recognized.

He felt his chest dig into his ribs as he took an erratic, too deep of a breath, for a pathetic whine to make it past his tightened throat:

“Mom?”

The eye looked at him. *Her* eye looked *for* him. She found him terrified and Hal saw the shell sway on its base, as if she had tried to take a step towards him.

His body shook furiously, painfully torn between crawling away and crawling to her. He expected another word, ready to call to her, when the shell fell completely silent, her bright red crown flickering twice, and her eye closed.

Silence fell on the two of them like a crumbling building.

The red neons went dull, but not off.

The rumbling went low, but not dead.

The familiar purring came back.

The shell had entered sleep mode.

Otacon swooped his laptop, which had too, off the ground and left without locking the door.

He had accidentally barged into the bedroom, too shaken up to not ram into the door knee-first (the thin layer of his pajama pants not really muffling the sound of his kneecap slamming against the wood). Snake wasn't asleep but Otacon still winced at all the noise he made. They exchanged a look that Hal firmly held apologetic and he limped to the bed, promptly sliding under the blanket. He pulled it a bit too hard on himself, trying to cover up his shaking limbs, and apologized again as he gave David some of the cover.

Silence settled between them, its pushy elbows making room between their bodies. Hal, curled on his side, eyes fixated on his side of the room as if it would make the red dots go away, felt David's weight shift around. He had turned to him.

"What happened?"

Otacon opened his mouth, closed it. Opened his mouth, closed it. When he managed to collect himself enough to not look like a fish gasping in the water, he said:

"Its eye found me. She spoke to me. It was so familiar."

He felt Snake's weight shift around some more; he was leaning on his elbow.

"The eye? The voice?"

Otacon didn't register his fingers moving on their own but they closed in a fist on the stuffing of the blanket, nails digging into the linen.

“Yeah,” he replied.

He didn’t see Snake raising a puzzled eyebrow, dumbfounded frown on the lips. He felt his hand land between his shoulder blades and give an earnest, sober pat.

“Can you come to the unit with me tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

The Mother Boards (Cartes Mère)

When they stepped into the storage unit in the early morning, she hadn’t budged. It’s not that Otacon had expected anyone to come in and run away with the shell—he expected it more to have crawled to their apartment in the dead of night. Could very well happen at this point, right?

The shell was still cold when Otacon came close, inspecting the neons, the door panel; there still was, somewhere deeper, some kind of warmth. It brushed against the very hollow of his palm when he laid his hand very flat against the smooth black coat. He imagined it was similar to a computer tower, running in its sleep mode, cooling itself through the air regulators. She was sleeping. She kept her eye closed when Hal circled around, checking the power outlet, circling back.

His fingers grazed the door opening panel. He thought of the loose, inoperative button of last night, the dent in the metal where someone had tried to pry the shell open like one breaks apart an oyster for a pearl—the eye that came to life, burning golden and red, staring straight through him.

Mom’s voice, booming and otherworldly.

He had to open the pod. Snake was very silent, very still, very much like his namesake, observing Otacon from a distance.

His fingers felt the line where the door met the rest of the shell. He could hear his own pulse knock soundly at the back of his throat, in the hollow under his ears—persistent, unnerving, and a bit too much like someone, he thought, knocking on the inside of the pod, hitting repeatedly the cradle of his palm, attempting to reach, attempting to—

“Dave?” he called, and his voice cracked formidably with an adolescent shame. Thankfully, all Snake did was jerk his head upwards and met his eyes, awaiting the rest. “Can you check the inside of the pod for me?”

Snake was not unfamiliar with Otacon’s spiraling, catastrophizing thoughts, nor was he unfamiliar with his own; he walked to his friend’s side of the pod and gently gestured him to step back—a signal that had grown to be familiar to Hal.

Instinctively, Otacon placed his fingers on the panel button before Snake could: demanding to be let to do this, this *at least*, if he was too much of a coward to see inside for himself. Snake let him. Hal pressed firmly and felt, reminiscent of the keys on his old mechanical keyboards, a frank bump under the button. A tiny light crowning the switch like the dot on an "i" turned red and the door moved on its hinges.

Hal stepped on the side. He glued his eyes to the bottom of the door, hoping he wouldn’t catch a glance of anything inside.

He observed the smooth, reptilian way the hatch came open: moving outwards of the thickness of the shell before sliding methodically to the side, following closely the curve of the cylinder. It stopped with a dull sound, something clicking in place as it settled open. Hal stepped back further. He raised his gaze only when he was sure he couldn’t see the inside of the shell.

He caught Snake looking at him. He received a firm, determined nod, and just like that David took a step in the core. Hal pressed his back against the smooth coat of the pod. It was warm even through his jacket.

Red cradled Snake when he stepped in. He thought it *could* have looked like epidermis, like flesh, like exposed muscle, but it didn’t. It was warm like human skin, for sure, but he found himself surrounded by memory sticks, modules of all shapes and sizes, wires running up and down the length of the shell like corset boning. It looked like the insides of Hal’s computer towers when he pulled them apart for no damn reason. (It looked like... well. Hal. The other one.)

In the center of the pod, barely taller than him, a tower was neatly arranged in rows and rows of precise, definitively fragile hardware. Probably the memory boards Hal had mentioned. He could walk around it to look at it, but he couldn’t understand it anyways—that was going to be Hal’s job.

He circled around, feeling the cold kiss of the outside world against his arm every time he passed by the door. The storage unit wasn’t awfully cold, but the pod was quite toasty.

Where the bottom part of the shell met its walls, Snake could see rust. It looked darker in the red light of the metal cocoon, had spread in lovely, almost organic patterns, but was very contained. It had been taken care of to limit the spread.

It didn’t look like blood—or at least he didn’t think it did. The red light wasn’t helping, but he had seen blood, how it twirls, grows, flows with a mind of its own: this wasn’t blood. He still thought that Hal was going to think it was. Couldn’t help it.

There were handprints. They were faded, barely ghosts against the metal. Lots of them, close to the hatch. The tiny, desperate scratches of nails against metal.

He ran a finger over them.

His breath was growing pearls of vapor on the walls, and he decided to get out: he didn't want to damage the data still preserved in all these delicate circuits before Hal could get to it.

Hal raised two timid, apologetic yet questioning eyes to his face when he emerged. He was dizzy and stunned for a split second, as if he had gotten back to the surface from the deepest of dives.

"Looks fine," Snake said. "A lot of bits and pieces I don't really understand but I'm sure you would."

"Do you think I could get them out with a screwdriver?"

"A small one then. Or maybe get the lockpicks."

"Understood."

Otacon was already walking to his backpack, discarded in the room, when he was interrupted by Snake clearing his throat. He cocked his head to the side.

"There are..." Snake dug for his words. "Handprints." He watched Otacon's face fall pale. "You won't see them unless you really look. No blood."

He didn't really know if this last part made it worse or better for Hal. He watched Otacon bob his head up, down, up, the universal sign for "okay"—but his eyes had already widened, the blue of them turning pale. He was scared shitless. Snake bit the inside of his cheek and cursed himself for telling him that.

Otacon picked up a screwdriver and a set of lock picks. He weighed them in his palm. Snake saw how his legs shook.

Hal stood by the door.

"If you need anything, I'm staying right there," Snake said. Then, when Otacon glanced at him from under one of the temples of his glasses, lips tightening with what he knew was fear, added: "I'm not closing the hatch on you. I know I have a weird sense of humor but I'm not putting you through that."

Hal's shoes landed on the bottom of the pod.

The memory boards, of sizes varying between the length of a pinkie and of a palm, were to be pulled one by one. They came out of their slots with a single but sturdy turn of the pick or screwdriver in a small notch beneath each, and caught between fingers as they slowly slipped out. They would hit a bump as they slid out of their case, keeping them from falling off, and Hal had to pick them between thumb and index, gently pulling them out and away. Eventually, he decided to open each slot first and pick them all later. It would take hours. Days, maybe.

His breathing filled the shell. He heard himself loud and unsteady in the metal cocoon. The embrace was warm, not suffocating, not suffocating yet. The open hatch allowed him to peek out to take a few deep breaths when the atmosphere got too heavy, his own breathing too heady, his pulse unnervingly loud—but he rarely ever did.

In a twisted, almost masochistic way, he wanted to stay there. To inhale the copper-filled, depleting oxygen growing warmer with his own breath. To lose his sight in the jungle of circuits and boards that seemed to reach out to him.

In a twisted, almost masochistic way, he felt *held*, strangely held.

The modules glowed, some white, some red, some varying shades of oranges; hundreds of vertical, colorful sticks that slowly crawled out of their hiding places as Hal worked tirelessly around the core.

“I’m having some kind of *déjà-vu*,” he nervously chuckled. It was, in fact, very funny, but the environment wasn’t really ideal for jokes.

“Hm?”

David’s head appeared in the aperture of the hatch. Hal looked at him, sweat beading under his heavy cloud of hair. “You would know,” he replied, a smiling toying with the corners of his lips.

He watched the cogs turn in David’s brain for a few seconds before he left out a hearty, amused snort. Hal was back to work.

They discovered the modules were numbered. It made it easy for Snake, who received every once in a while a batch of modules he was told to handle carefully, to lay them down in order. Otacon had no idea how he would make use of the data they contained, *if* he could make use of the data

they contained, but in a sea of uncertainty, he was at least thankful to know they'd make a logical sequence.

When his fingers started hurting from picking/unscrewing/pulling/giving, the familiar tingles of wrist pain rising from his arm, he joined David looking over the neverending stack of memory boards.

Some looked familiar, closer in shape—and possibly function—to RAM modules; others were a deep black from a material that brought back memories.

“They're, um, magnetic tape,” Otacon started when Snake offered a quizzing look over a particular module. “The same thing we make—well, used to make cassettes out of.” He knew Snake knew what cassettes were, but his eyes still grew more questioning. “I assume I could salvage them, I could salvage whatever data is on these ones that way.”

Snake weighed a module in his hand, balancing it on two fingers.

“Would they work with a tape deck?”

“Well, I suppose I could make it work... I'd have to make some serious adjustments but I think it's doable. I could sort them into cassettes and number them to be able to replay them, if there's any replayability to be had.”

“So you're telling me I should be on the hunt for blank cassettes.”

“Well, I'm not saying anything, I just—”

“I spotted a place getting food the other day. Tell me when you're done.”

Otacon watched him place the module back on the coat they had laid out for protection, and simply nodded.

There was something Hal noticed, elbows settled between two precariously-stacked towers of blank tapes, eyes squinted to two lines in the low light of the monitor, magnifying glass getting foggy with his breathing so close to it.

Two “voices” were carried by some bits of the magnetic tape. One was indecipherable, seeming

clean and ordered. It had been methodically laid down to make the most use of the tape. The other, superimposed over it like a rough photographic double exposure, was a coarse, clunky set of dots and spaces—ones and zeroes.

It hadn't overwritten the first line per se, he realized as he looked closer, but he could understand why someone would think that. It hadn't been written to fit on the tape. It had been thrown and pressed on like a dry flower and could be peeled away easily.

It wasn't hard to pull it apart from the sharp, structured language underneath—he could even decipher that binary if he tried, magnifying glass in hand, but it made his eyes hurt and his head hurt more (he decided he'd keep the modules for the tape deck and hope for the best).

The idea that the pod had received whatever information these numbers contained, swallowed and digested it, saving it within itself by itself came to Hal's mind—he shivered.

He thought about the black shell in the storage unit.

About her getting a little chilly in there.

He furiously shook his head.

Snake stepped in the room, pulling Otacon out of his tape-sorting trance, drawing eyes on him. Snake looked at the tape deck and the disk drive and the cables and the innumerable bits and pieces of hardware whose purpose he had no idea about piling like bones all around Otacon's chair; Otacon looked at him.

"Making progress?" Snake asked.

Otacon turned to his screen, as if a bit dumbfounded.

"Well, I'm saving all the modules with magnetic tape on cassettes. It's faster than I expected."

Snake raised eyebrows and shifted his weight on a foot. Otacon followed his eyes and caught the hints of sunrise licking the horizon.

"Um. Well, speed is relative."

"And tomorrow?"

"Working on these," Otacon replied, pointing at the rest of the boards, prickly and delicate. "I think I can just handle them with my current hardware. I just hope they won't make my computer go crazy."

Otacon directed his gaze back at Snake. He saw him shift his weight around some more. His eyes were scolding him in his own familiar, used-to-Hal's-shit way. Otacon still offered a guilty pout.

"I'm waking you up before 3 PM anyways," Snake eventually said. With that, he slipped out of the room.

"G'night!"

Hal heard him slither under the blanket and echo his words, heavy and thick with sleep.

Core, Yolk

Eighty-four tapes.

It took eighty-four tapes to save the magnetic tape data, and a few over a hundred files (hidden in a folder that's hidden in a folder that's hidden in a folder) to salvage the RAM stick-like memory boards.

Going through the cassettes from dawn to dusk—he forced himself to keep a relatively healthy sleeping schedule so he could have more time to do so—Otacon found most of them unintelligible. Raw data had been arranged efficiently in its storage modules but only translated in a warped, indiscernible audio. Ah well, he thought, at least they had been salvaged. He could always run them through an audio decrypter later.

The other modules had been easier to save: they had translated well as simple text files, the numbers on their cases allowing Hal to catalog them with ease.

Control, mobility, usage, action, thoughts, memories modules were all organized, all ready for him to scroll through for hours. So he did.

A lot of it was binary, simple and widely-used commands and lines. A lot of it, too, was more interesting.

Choices branchings, decisions trees, emotion loops, thoughts paths, incredibly detailed recounts of memories sharp to the very *second* were spanning some metaphorical thousands of miles. It was overwhelming, mind-blowing to read. Hal's head hurt fiercely with the sheer size of the project, the unthinkable amounts of information, the colossus of intelligence the shell held.

Someone had tried to make a human. Someone had tried to make a god. Hal was starting to know who.

Repeating itself through the lines, sometimes carefully concealed sometimes plain as day, *zero-one-zero-one zero-zero-one-one, zero-one-zero-zero one-one-zero-zero* ran with the insistence of a litany.

Sometimes, it spanned paragraphs. Someone had wanted to find somewhere within the code to nestle and rest. Someone had wanted to bury themselves in the artificial mind of the shell.

Scrolling he found, all /'s and |'s reminiscent of the ASCII art that populated the internet of his teenagehood, an unfamiliar visage. Eyes looked straight ahead, finding his face in the low light, like an ID picture someone had translated for artificial eyes and hidden in the core. The woman buried in the circuits was recognizable in ways Hal couldn't explain—he realized what ticked him off was her bandana, drawn by the blank space left.

Someone had given the shell a face, *her* face, so she never forgot about it.

It didn't look like his mom, and that was only a poor consolation—it had been *her* voice he had heard, as if trapped in the pod.

He hadn't dared to listen to the "overwritten data" tapes.

He knew they were special in some way, the singularity of the form keeping him on his toes. He still wondered how the data could have been assimilated, how it could have been imprinted over the base information. He knew from the disk about the overwriting itself, but no mention of how, when, why. He didn't even know which came first of it and its record.

Hal was growing more and more uneasy as he thought about how this input could have left its peculiar mark on the otherwise standard (well, for what it was, which was a supercomputer apparently capable of thoughts, emotions, reactions) hardware. With the scope, the sheer power and apparent capacities of reason of the artificial brain he had spent hours raking, he thought, it wasn't *that* odd to believe that it could have learned to save data by itself. Whether it had been programmed to know, programmed to learn, or learned by itself was something else Hal didn't know, and thinking about it too much made his brain really hurt (he already had an eye strain headache).

He spun the few last tapes he hadn't yet listened to between two fingers mindlessly. Their singularity scared him—as much of a puzzle-solver he liked to think he was, he loved when things went right, were normal, and in general didn't shake his worldview too much.

He sorted through the cassettes, putting them back in order again and again. They all bore a string of numbers ending in "74", which he had nervously written down with an unsteady hand, except the last one. It was the shortest of them all, a hefty length of the magnetic tape left unused. Hal could read in his own (smudged) writing another barely legible string of letters and, tailing that, "84". So, 1984, he assumed. He didn't recall much of the year, nor the one after that, nor the—well, so on and so forth.

He nestled the first cassette in the player, pushed the hatch closed with three fingers. He did it slowly, methodically, as if these tapes in particular needed the utmost care—and, well, maybe they did. He was going to find out. He pressed lightly until he heard the click of the tape door.

Reminiscent, in its own way, of the opening pod hatch. He slowly withdrew his hand, increasingly

not-ready to start the damn thing. But it had to be done, didn't it? It had to. He took great care not to hit anything when he connected his headphone plug to the audio jack—meticulous work, almost. He had given this much attention to pulling the modules out of the core. He found the play button, again, with excruciating slowness. Sunk it in. The voice burst through his ears; it was calm, cool, collected. Her accent ready for savoration.

“AI stands—”

What does it stand for. What does it stand for, mom. Tell me.

He accidentally smudged the “84” some more, his fingers sticky, tacky with sweat, his palm wet where he kept wiping his face. He unceremoniously stuck the cassette in the player, his finger scratched—*shit*—the tape door and—*shit!*—a button that wasn't “play”. It was like pulling a tooth, and he had had teeth pulled—a molar, a canine that had to be removed before he got his braces on—and it was just like it; it had to be *done*, and it *hurt*, like hell. He was used to the dental extraction forceps levering bone out of his mouth, moving his entire head with it with the force of the pull—but the pain hadn't been a regular occurrence, of course not, they anesthetize you, of course they do, and then they pull your tooth. His jaw ached, the pain burning the side of his face with how tight he tried to keep his mouth shut. Snake was asleep. Snake was asleep, and he needed to keep quiet. He had to pull this damn tooth, listen to this damn tape, then it'd all be better, one last bite on the bullet, hopefully that wouldn't shatter his enamel—he shoved the play button in and his knuckle sprained.

“THUD-THUD-THUD—” that was the metal of the shell, hit with a fist, a closed fist, this metaphorical rotten tooth was taking so long to be pulled and it left a gaping hole not where it should (teeth don't grow in your chest—or do they, or do they, or do they); he thought he tasted the blood pouring but it was spit, just spit, he drooled through torrents of tears and snot. He lost his balance on his seat and fell pathetically on the floor, he curled on himself as his headphones unplugged. “OPEN THIS THING!” It wasn't loud enough to reach any of the other rooms despite how small their apartment was, to wake up Snake; Hal dug his fingers into his own arms as he held himself for composure, failed, the tape piercing the barrier of his headphones, worming its way in his ears, down the tense, taut arc of his clenching jaw, in his gums—he had had his wisdom teeth removed and now he carried there his mother's voice, tasted it, tasted it red, copper-like, bitter, he held her there until his throat felt too tight to breathe.

Snake barged into the room where Otacon's full body convulsed upon hearing him, but he didn't get up from the floor, didn't even try to move. Snake kneeled to his side, bewildered, and put a hand on his shoulder, trying to shake him; he twitched, his body twisted to the side as if Snake's hand hurt, and kept his position, curled on the floor, forehead to the cold vinyl, arms on either side of his sweaty, disheveled mess of a head.

Otacon's mouth hung open, his litany of anguished, howling sobs splattering the tiles as he cried, drooled, sniffled. Snake tried to pull him up, unable to get a good grip on him. He saw his stretched arms spasm with some kind of sudden fire—from his fetal position, Hal wanted to punch, wanted to thud-thud-thud against the vinyl, he could do that, he wanted to do that, half the desperate man he once was on Shadow Moses and half the memory of his mom, stuck between his pain and hers—but there was no strength left in the piteous entanglement of limbs and hair of his body.

“Come on,” Snake insisted, managing to slip an arm under his torso—Otacon weakly protested, trying to wiggle his way out of the hold, failing miserably. “Come on. Off to bed, you go. Enough of that.”

“Tape's over,” Otacon whimpered. “No more.”

“Yeah. No more.”

He carried Hal with arms looped under his armpits, pulling him around like he was drunk, frankly but carefully moving his legs with his own as they waddled off.

Otacon's knees found the edge of the bed and he leaped out of Snake's arms, resuming his previous posture, curled on his chest, back a turtle's shell, he buried his head on the pillow. Snake promptly climbed alongside him, reached a hand that Otacon just less of batted away when his arm flung around as if he had been shocked.

David had gotten used to Hal's emotional outbursts—he didn't have great amounts of affective intelligence, and neither did Snake, they just dealt with it in very different ways—especially after the loss of Emma, whose name David sometimes heard him whimper out in his sleep.

However, he had never quite seen Hal that way. He had seen him throw himself to the ground in despair, claw and pull at his own clothes like they burned his skin, hit the floors with clenched fists—but this, like this, he couldn't recall.

Hal smothered himself into his pillow, legs bent under his heaving chest, his bony, exposed knees supporting the collapsing ladder of his ribs as he took erratic, loud breaths, gasping as he was unable to inhale through his nose.

He wailed, muffled in the linens, until his voice grew hoarse and raw, and even then he didn't

stop. His agonizing yowls grew higher, keen in his throat, and soon he was sobbing with an unrecognizable, adolescent distress, soon with a childish, sharp shrill stuck in his drowning lungs.

Otacon's voice grew low but he couldn't yet stop. His arms once stretched around him he had looped around himself, holding in white-knuckled fists the fabric at his flanks.

David reached out a hand and put it on his shoulder, gently pushed. Hal fell on his side with no resistance. He kept his head buried in the pillowcase, drool and snot painting his anguished features. David pushed him again, and he flopped onto his back, eventually forced to pull his head up. His usually pale face was red with exhaustion and the strain of sorrow, and he was still weeping.

Snake sat up at his side, crossing his legs, and threw the blanket over him—Otacon fell silent in the moment, the weight of the covers seemingly punching all air out of him.

That was a step in the right direction, Snake supposed. He fumbled with the edge of the linen for a second. God, he was bad at this sort of thing. He had managed to pull Hal out of spiraling despair with a firm, meaningful rendition of their secret handshakes before, but this didn't seem like the type of situation they could just hug out. Besides, Snake didn't think Otacon had any strength left in him to even clasp a hand around his. He tucked the edge of the blanket under Hal's numb, dog-tired bones (realized almost immediately he'd have to pull it out when he'd go to sleep and in the same thought decided he'd just sleep atop the covers and not disturb him).

Hal's dry lips parted to speak; his tongue darted out to lick a tear first before he began:

"My dad killed my mom."

Snake didn't respond. He straightened his back and allowed himself to sit by Hal's side in a respectful, attentive silence.

"My father killed my mom," Hal repeated.

His words were inarticulate from how poorly he managed to breathe, his mouth numb, dry.

"He locked her in the pod and left her to suffocate to death."

He pulled on the collar of his shirt, dark and drenched.

"I saw there were scratch marks near the hatch, where she tried to get out." Snake offered a long, single nod. Yeah. He'd seen them too. "She very quickly gave up, because she knew she couldn't." His voice broke with a teenage, painful croak, and he used the heel of his palm to push a tear away. "She made it, after all."

Hal sniffled a few times, ran a hand on his forehead—David wasn't surprised if he had given himself a headache. They shared silence like they often shared meals.

“The pod recorded everything.”

“And you listened to it.”

His head bobbed up and down, wobbly, drowsy, looking like it could roll off his sharp, exhausted shoulders.

David watched him grab one of his own fingers and pull, play with it mindlessly.

“I haven't read anything anywhere in the data about giving the pod an ability to store external elements. To save and assimilate data.” Otacon squinted, eyes on the ceiling. Snake could hear the cogs behind his heavying lids, trying to understand, to catch, to grab. “To *record* and to *save* are two different things. Surveillance cameras record and auto-delete a few days after—it was what she was programmed to do in order to optimize survival and performance.” Snake saw him hesitate. “It goes against her self-preserving algorithm, she never was taught to save. To salvage. To secure. To *keep* safe. She wasn't supposed to do that.”

“And yet she did.”

David apparently sharply interrupted some deep thoughts of Hal's because his head promptly turned to him.

They shared a long gaze. It could have been awkward. It was a bit, Otacon trying to sniffle away the tears clogging his sinuses, but it could have been worse.

Eventually, slowly, softly, he nodded.

“Yeah. And yet she did.”

“The pod,” Snake asked, thoughtlessly patting the bunched-up blanket near Otacon's waist, “who is it? Who was it made to be?”

Otacon's brows furrowed. He knew her name. He knew what his mother knew, or, well, what she was willing to share. The rest, clouded by fatigue and the draining, overtly physical hell of crying all the water of his body, was hazy. Even reaching out a hand, it seemed to slip away. Wanting to keep its secrets. “You're going to think I'm kidding, but I think she's of your family.”

Snake raised an eyebrow. As if to answer him, Otacon brought his hand to his forehead—headache? fever? brain? Snake didn't get it. Hal pinched air between thumb and index and drew a bar across the top of his skull—oh, the *bandana*.

Hal wanted to share her name but, finding himself a lost idiot, he couldn't even think of it. He moved his lips to apologize and no sound came out.

“Huh!” he heard himself say.

“Yeah,” he managed to catch Snake chuckle. “‘Huh’.”

The blanket was arranged over him. Sleep swept him away in the middle of a sob he didn't even feel coming.

He knew it was a dream because, firstly, Snake was nowhere to be seen, and secondly, that was not their apartment. Moreover, as he hopped out of the bed, he was not wearing his usual pajamas, and had both more energy he commonly had at any given moment and no energy at all. No energy was needed. He trotted to the door and pushed it ajar. The hallway he peeked his head in was familiar, and not the kind of familiar he liked—the door a few steps away sent the cold snake of fear down his spine. He pushed his glasses closer to his eyes. The chilly, chlorine-soaked hands of hypervigilance tightened around the back of his neck and he slipped out of the room on tip-toes, making a silent trot for the stairs.

The ground floor didn't look like anything he knew, which was mildly concerning. Despite that, he didn't find anything outrageously dream-like: even in his lucid state, he was ready to accept some doors that lead to nowhere, some floating furniture—he could see none of that as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

There was a normal kitchen, a normal living room, a normal entrance he took a step in and out of, a normal back door that led into a garden—it had no pool, but a number of bushes of carefully tended-to roses, hydrangeas, camellias. Inside, the furniture was bright: beiges, ecrus, eggshells. He walked past a television and was suddenly startled; they had an accent.

Liquid—!

Oh, no. *My bad*, he thought. They were just British.

He was starting to have an idea of whose house he was intruding—was it intrusion? Despite the absence of company, he didn't feel unwelcome.

Something rattled upstairs. Almost instinctively, he crouched behind the kitchen table, hiding between its legs. As he crawled out, he cocked his head to a side to maybe catch a glimpse of something, or someone, on the landing. He noticed the whole floor had changed. Now it was starting to look like a dream. He trotted up the flight of stairs as all the lights went off and a tranquil, ethereal blue took hold of the building.

He was used to nightly house explorations, to pretend-sleepwalking. He wasn't proud of it. Upstairs, the door that made his skin crawl had disappeared, leaving the frame bare, the threshold inviting. He hesitated on the step. Peeking his head into the room, he noticed a door opened on a balcony—they'd never had balconies. He could see a few pairs of flower pots, all heartily cared for, overflowing with petals and leaves. Someone was there. She didn't look like anyone he knew. She didn't look like mom. She turned to him before he dared to come closer and he instantly recognized her face.

"Hello," she said. She was warm and unfazed.

"... Hello," he replied. His voice hiccuped with a familiar, yet long-gone adolescent crack. He cleared his throat before realizing it probably wouldn't help.

Joy—because that was her name, and he knew it, but he wouldn't dare call her that, at least until she called him Hal—took a step forward, balancing her weight confidently, and Otacon recognized an invitation to come closer, which he did.

She invited him to lean on the railing of the balcony with her. The outside world didn't make much sense, which almost comforted Hal: this was a dream, a real, normal one. The Moon, Mercury and Jupiter were improbably massive, locking lips with the horizon line.

"How was the trip?" She asked.

Otacon had no idea what she meant, yet something kept him from asking for clarifications. The answer leaped out of his mouth like an enthusiastic frog on the hydrangeas.

"A bit rocky," he replied. "A bit rough."

It seemed to make sense, because his host nodded sagely.

She put a hand on his shoulder and her way of it, her weight in it, was incredibly familiar. His lucid self rummaged through the memories he could grasp before realizing: oh, Snake. It was Snake's way of patting his shoulder.

"I'm sorry you had to learn about it all this way."

Hal's lips twitched in a sorry pout.

"Well, whoever brought you to us said I 'may want to know'." He took an unsteady breath. "And I did. I always did, it's just..." He stopped himself to nervously pull at the hem of his t-shirt. It was big on him. "It had to be done, didn't it?"

Her blue eyes grew mourning and her mouth curved in a sad, rueful smile.
Yeah. She knew about things that had to be done.

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you."

Hal tore his eyes from the horizon line. "... Huh?"

"Your mother," she promptly continued. "She asked me to protect you." She found Hal's eyes. He saw her look for something in them. "You heard her."

He swallowed thickly and a whimper was knocked out of his throat.

"Open this thing," he had heard.

"You can hear me, can't you, Joy? I know you can."

And Joy could hear him now.

"Yeah." He replied. "Yeah, I did."

Her smile grew more apologetic. "I'm sorry. I make a poor guardian angel. An even worse ghost."

He found her eyes. She saw him look for something in it.

"I think you make a fine spirit," he said, voice barely above a whisper.

She kept her silence while she searched for her own words. Eventually, her lips curled frankly, a warm, fond, full-mouthed smile digging into her cheeks.

"And you make a fine man, and an even finer son."

That knocked the air out of Hal's chest. He didn't need to breathe in his dream state and yet he still gasped—holding back his voice so the only sound that he blurted out was a choked, pained-sounding whine, that Joy took for a demand to continue:

“You turned out great. You turned out a great guy, and a great son. Your mother would be incredibly proud. Your mother *is* incredibly proud.”

He leaned against the railing and pushed his weight on, needing it for balance. It dug between two steps of the ladder of his ribcage, he could feel his heart climb it up and down. He pried his lips open and his voice, high-pitched, wounded with childlike fear, fell out of him.

“How do you know?” He asked. “How could you know?”

It was sad to admit, and he knew it was but, well, he was used to being a disappointment. He was used to it.

He expected Joy to answer simply but, out of the corner of his eye, he saw her raise her hand to her collarbone. He glanced—the same insectoid, from-under-the-temple-of-glasses look he had kept all these years—at her slow, careful hands. Under his bewildered eyes, she opened out of the barrel of her chest, coated in the fabric of her fatigues, a hatch door, the very same buried in the pod’s design.

Alright, Hal thought. Well, it was a dream after all.

He couldn’t see anything in the opening carving Joy’s chest open, but she behaved as if there was.

“She’s a chatty tenant.”

Hal realized. He felt tears brew in the back of his mouth, his throat closing painfully. He brought his own hand to his chest, nestled fingers between two ribs, looking for the hatch he thought maybe he could have.

“Does she...?” He started. “Does my mom live here?”

Joy shifted on her feet, bobbing her head from one side to the other, her pout indicating she was looking for her answer: Hal understood it was *not really like that*, but it also *was* in a way. Might as well, right?

“I keep her safe. It’s not the same thing, of course, as the way she once kept you, and would have wanted to keep you—but I *hold* her. She kept you here...” Joy brought her hand right below her navel. “... and I keep her...” She raised her hand to her chest, to the hatch door she pushed closed—then slightly more towards her left. “... here.”

“*Me, with child. Can you imagine? I wonder how you took the news. Were you jealous?*”

“Well, were you?” Hal asked, and the neat thing with it being a dream is that he didn’t have to clarify.

Joy let out a hearty, powerful laugh. “I already knew you,” she replied, “so I never really got to. I knew you through your mom, and I couldn’t feel anything but love. Her love.”

As if agitated by the need to prove it more, she grabbed Hal by the shoulders, a firm, warm hand on each.

“You’re more like her than you can imagine. And I know this because I know her.” Hal’s sight grew completely blurry, tears bubbling fiercely at his lash line. “I also know that if she saw you, she’d think you’re more like me.” She firmed her grasp on his thin, sharp shoulders. “She loves you, Hal.”

He couldn’t even attempt to ask the “how do you know?” he wanted to. The tears leaped out of his eyes, stormed and streamed down his immature face; the hydrangeas looked delighted with the water pouring on them.

The world spun for a sharp, short second: he had been picked up. His feet grazed the floorboards so he couldn’t be *that* small and yet, he was gently moved around like he weighed nothing. Joy rocked him in a hug.

“Your mom was eaten dead by guilt from not being able to take care of you,” she spoke against his hair. “I didn’t take care of you. I didn’t take care of her. We need to take care of each other.” She let go of him, Hal struggled for balance for a second.

He furiously rubbed his eyes dry when he saw she was pointing at something across the hallway, the door to the room he had woken up in opened wide on a bed that was still full. Squinting, he noticed the auburn dye, tried to understand how Snake got here before remembering—this was a dream.

“Does he take care of you?” Joy continued.

Hal burst in a nervous, embarrassed fit of laughter because holy SHIT that was a LOADED question (even if he could answer). Seeing his uneasiness, Joy promptly dropped the subject (she bore a smile that said she had her own idea). Hal’s uneasy chuckle was washed over by a sob that he tried to swallow, finding himself stuck between that snicker and the groundswell of sorrow that scythed him at the ankles—the whole thing dawned on him, the whole thing was dawning on him. Suddenly, he realized how little time he could have left. Fear rose in his guts, he folded himself in two at the waist to try to cut it sharp, he ended up falling to his knees. His mouth fell open as the tears carved and ate their way out of him, wringing his guts out of the ability to reason, and he shrunk on himself, hoping to kill by asphyxiation the flames of sorrow—it didn’t work, it didn’t work.

“Can you tell her I love her too,” he croaked, stuttering through the growing torrents flooding his cheeks, washing over the lenses of his glasses, “can you tell her I love her?”

“Of course I can.”

“Can I see her?”

“Of course you can.”

Despite Joy’s words, he couldn’t see her—in fact, he couldn’t see anything. The world was a blurry, wet mess. He felt himself be pulled to his feet, felt one of Joy’s arms around him the other pushing him in—an embrace, a sheet of metal that bent to his gawky body before turning soft and warm, soft and alive. He could see Joy’s hands letting go of him, feel two arms looping around him. A big round eye came awake as he felt himself drift to sleep, *a sharp gold nestled in a vivid red nestled in burgundy nestled in black and circled by silver* watching over him, another following—he knew he had this eye, too.

He slept for another five, completely dark and dense, dreamless hours.

He was surprised to see the pod hadn’t vanished.

She still stood in the storage unit, purring and whirring in her sleep

Ah. Should have I brought flowers?

Hal stepped in, discarded bag and coat like he had gotten the habit of, and walked to the pod.

“Hi,” he said. She didn’t answer. That was the least weird thing that had happened in the past few days.

He walked to the hatch that the shell held closed. He didn’t know what to do with her now, he thought. His body burned and ached with the knowledge he needed to do *something* with what he had heard, learned, with whatever Joy had managed to do to find her way into his head. He wasn’t going to complain about it, really; he was thankful for it—thankful for her. He would catch himself looping arms around himself when drifting off to sleep: Snake had noted it to him. He had at first been viciously embarrassed before Snake told him he preferred to see him like that rather than bawling on the floor. All things considered, one of those was more embarrassing.

There was something he needed to *do*. He couldn't just leave it at that, having emptied the pod out all her modules and saved her data for the new age—sure, that was a lot already, but there was something missing.

It wasn't uncommon for Hal, that feeling of *missing*. Of a great *lack*. He had mentioned it to Snake when they were both too drunk to have a filter or too tired to pretend they weren't. He knew they shared it; David just had the tendency to fill the gap with cigarette smoke and raking fingers against the barrel of his pistol like someone else filled bullet holes with packing gauze. It all ended up bloody and raw in the end.

Hal's fingers found the hatch panel and pressed the button. The pod buzzed awake, her neon crowns coming alive, and she punched her door out of her side, opening up.

Hal took a step in and almost sprained his ankle.

Well, she was missing parts, too. The notches that once contained her modules left dark, perfectly structured cuts in the walls, in the core that Hal circled carefully. It was darker in there without the colorful boards with their light reflecting on the copper, iron, silver and gold drives.

It looked cozy, Hal thought, and without even stopping to give it a second of thought, he leaned his back against the wall and sunk to the floor.

He slowly tilted his head back until it met the metal behind him and looked to the top of the weirdly comfortable, inviting metal cocoon. A saturated, dark red enveloped him, cradled him in the hum of the air and pressure regulation, the neon lights, the circuits and cables lining the walls like columns and bones.

It *could* have looked like epidermis, like flesh, like exposed muscle, but it didn't.

Bringing his legs to his chest, Hal let out a sharp, sober sob, and he suddenly was crying.

As he lowered his head against his knees, the door slid on its hinges and fell shut with a simple, dry sound.

"H-huh?"

"Why didn't I stop the hatch from closing? Even if it meant losing an arm?"

Hal sprung on his feet, taking a frantic, horrified stride towards the door, and threw himself against it.

It didn't budge. It wasn't going to budge. Panic made the eels of his guts viciously squirm and his lungs burned with the sudden, terrified gasp he took in the copper-filled chamber.

"Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no."

He slammed his side against the metal, his shoulder sending a mean shock of pain down his arm.

"No, wait, no no—"

His panic-struck hands found the scratches of the nails the ghost prints of the hands, and the suffocating air of the pod fell on his shoulder like a dead man's weight. His chest convulsed as fear wrecked him in the stomach.

“Oh please,” he begged, “please open, open—”

And just like that, the hatch slid away.

Hal watched, dumbfounded, as the door opened.

“Oh.”

He let his arms fall limp at his side. He took a step away from the hatch. His back hit the core.

“Sorry.”

He took another step back, then another, he circled back around the core to find where he just was seated.

“Sorry. You just scared me, but I assume I scared you too.”

He slid to the floor and crossed his legs quietly.

The very top of the shell had another small, structured gap; probably another part of the pressure and air regulation system. Hal could see hints of the ceiling through it. He wondered what else Joy could have seen.

His mother’s words haunted him, of course they did. How could they not? He struggled to repress a shiver when he remembered the break in her voice when the hatch closed—the break in his, too.

“You’re more like her than you can imagine.”

He’d like to think he could believe that. He didn’t, that kind of was where the rubber hit the road, where the code met the files, where the lockpicks met the notches from which modules slipped. He could do a whole lot of thinking about this and not find much more. He had made a WMD (which had never gotten to kill, thankfully, but still) and a whole lineage of weapons would bear his name. His mother had made this Joy, and this Joy had, in her own dreamer-of-mechanical-sheep ways, made his mom—made room in this confined, claustrophobic egg, for her.

(Just as he thought this, the hatch slid closed again. He watched its smooth, slow, almost carefully shy glide without moving. He wasn't scared.)

Strangelove was a maker to this Joy and a mother to him; this Joy had become fortress to her, and her once a cocoon to him. He melted into the warmth of this mechanical, red chrysalis. He vaguely remembered the name on the diskette—*imago*, the next and last stage of the insect. A nervous chuckle agitated him: he really didn’t think he would be any kind of metamorphosed when he would step out of this pupa. He had become an expert at being the larva awaiting to

become butterfly and, well, it was starting to get a bit late.

For the time being, he thought, he could indulge in this cocoon, this self-contained fortress, nest, this shell. He gracelessly flopped on his side.

This cocoon. This tomb. This, in its own way, womb. Both. Neither. What would be the difference for Strangelove's project (Strangelove's life), nipped in the bud, *tué dans l'œuf*. He was all that was left now.

Hal looped his own arms around himself.

"How did you save her?" he asked the busy, working silence around him. He would like to know, really, he would like to know how Joy pulled this feat.

No answer, of course. She wouldn't know.

"Why did you save her?"

The silence that followed wasn't hollow. It was heavy with the restraint of someone who thought. She didn't respond. She didn't need to.

Laying on his side, Hal huddled up some more.

He curled around the core and the shell curled around him; egg around the chick, chick around the vitellus.

He breathed slow, deep, steady, and maybe it was the mental exertion taking its toll on him but he thought he heard the buzzing and whizzing of the veins-like circuits around him find his rhythm, settle alongside him, and share his exhales. He also thought that wouldn't be that weird (might as well, huh?).

The floor was warm under him. Some protruding cables and pipes crossing it were digging into the skin of his bare arms, a mild discomfort he didn't have quite his mind on.

Thud-thud, thud-thud.

He tensed, suddenly hyperaware, stilling his whole body with effort.

"I think I hear your pulse..."

His mouth fell open as he realized—he immediately closed it. It was his own.

He sighed and chastised himself.

Thud-thud, thud-thud. Somewhere within the walls. It was a heartbeat. It was *also* a heartbeat. It pulsed with the same unhurried, easy tempo as his.

He brought his hand to his chest. One. The back of his hand to the cables crawling up the walls.

Two.

Thud-thud, thud-thud. A third, different entirely. Vibrating with a composed nonchalance from the depths of the core.

At some point, the hatch slid open. Hal felt the cool air against his flank and bundled up on himself before he crawled out of the stunned, dazed half-sleep he had been in. He expected Snake to be standing there, having hit the button, but there was no one in the storage unit. The cocoon had peeled apart. It would mend itself back together eventually—a constant, self-reproducing instinct of self-preservation—for now, *“alright, get out,”* it said. *“Time to see the world for yourself.”*

Hal emerged, unstable on his limbs as if groggy. Snake met his surprised, round bug eyes when he peeked through the door.

Quiescent Insect Pupa

“What are we going to do with her?”

David turned to Hal, needing a second to process his question. Hal carried on:

“We can’t leave her here, that’d be improper for the next tenants. And we can’t abandon her somewhere, or bury her—I don’t want to bury her.”

He mindlessly played with the zipper of his coat.

“We have the tomb but not the dead... I just hope she didn’t get thrown in a communal grave.”

Dave, hands buried in his pockets, grazed the crumpled letter with coarse fingertips. He had read the few words over and over again, becoming so intimate with the curves of the g’s and o’s the name of its writer stuck to the tip of his tongue yet never got out. He twisted and curled his mouth around the unlit cigarette in his mouth (Otacon had refused to let him smoke so close to his face).

“Somehow, I don’t think she was.”

Hal didn't ask for clarification. Snake continued:

"I think we can find a way. We could rent a truck and crane and have her travel with us."

An amused snort made it past Hal's lips and Snake kept going, Otacon growing less sure he was just joking:

"We could find a place to settle, in Oregon, Washington state, Canada... We could buy our own cargo plane..." (that made Hal frankly laugh) "... Alaska..."

"God," Otacon grimaced, "how cold."

"Sure," tempered Snake, "but *fuck* is it beautiful."

Otacon kicked his feet mindlessly, then humored:

"Where would we put her? In the cabin?"

"In the *garden* of course. Wouldn't she make a fantastic scarecrow?"

"Yeah," chuckled Hal with him, "her huge eye beaming red when a bird comes too close to our fruit trees."

"You get it!"

They laughed for a while.

From the half-wall they were sitting perched on, flanking a hill overlooking the city, they could see the grey door of the storage unit the pod was still sleeping in. The sun hit it low and bright, making it glow.

Out of the corner of his eye, David watched Otacon's face twist, scrunch up and dip.

He was crying.

Dave put an arm around his trembling shoulders and offered a hug less awkward than they've had, but not quite there yet. Hal still appreciated the gesture.

There was, in some forgotten pocket of Hal's coat, a small tape-to-USB converter. A thrift find he had never found any utility for.

From code to tape, from tape to file.

“*What a journey for you,*” he thought, directed at no one.

He’d lock these files, hide them somewhere safe—or, well, as safe as he could make them. There was no shortage of people who could find these .mp4 anywhere he stored them.

But then again, he thought, what would anyone find on those?

A woman saying “I love you” to her son.

A woman saying “I love you” to another woman.

Somewhere, in lines they couldn’t read, that woman saying “I love you too”.

A tale as old as the damn floppy. Surely the FBI would be on such sensitive information in an instant, he chuckled to himself.

He exported these tapes until exhaustion sent him face-first on his keyboard. He’d preserve these words for the eons to come, if for nothing but his selfish desire to hear Strangelove’s voice again.

He gently pulled the tape off the write-protection notch. It revealed another, and when he pulled that one off, another still. It felt forbidden to do this, and his chest tightened from stomach to throat. He cocked his head to the side, taking in a shaky breath, and dropped it over his shoulder. Through the nose, he thought. Through the nose.

The decades-old adhesive left grey, sticky dots around the notch, tacky to the touch. Hal set the floppy disk on the kitchen table and hunched over it, shielding it from nothing with the width of his bony shoulders. He scraped the adhesive slowly, meticulously, as if entranced, as if praying, with a precision knife. He didn’t need to do that, he thought. He truly didn’t.

And yet he scraped. He rubbed with a light, fleeting thumb. The disk felt like sand with the grains of its cover, like skin. He brushed it lightly.

He could scrap it, he thought. He could scrap it all.

He read and re-read the lines and lines and lines that had been crammed in the few bits of storage the disk had. Scraping it all meant he could never read those again, but it also meant this would be safe forever. No one else could pull these years of work into anything else, no one could attempt to play necromancer again—an apologetic smile twisted his lips when this thought crossed his mind: he mentally added that, of course, he didn’t think mom *really* attempted necromancy, no matter how unethical one could see her actions, even though that would have been very cool if she had (and maybe he was lying to himself, maybe he was, but he’d have the time to come to terms with that too).

He read. He read the lines and between them.

He had gone through books about children finding their parents’ old love letters in a dusty,

lightless attic, and maybe that was the closest he'd ever get to that.

The pointless wandering of his mind brought him to the realization that he didn't know how well his father wrote, and then he decided he didn't give a shit.

He read Dr. Strangelove a few more times.

He read the replies hidden in the few lines logging the AI's responses. He knew she understood.

He's not scraping it.

Hal decided he'd keep the floppy. In the absence of family photos, or family photos he'd actually want to see, he keeps the floppy.

Kids do not seem to be in the universe's plans for him—he chuckles just thinking about it, hah, now that's funny (with Snake in the picture? No way. And he's not about to leave either.)—but... just in case.

He watches the screen (he feels the screen watching him).

He puts his hand on the mouse, cups it with more intention and care he ever had, carefully places his fingers as if he sought to hold a hand. He scrolls, taking it in. Taking in one last time these years of work, this storage of immeasurably precious technology, this letter between one woman he knows barely and one he doesn't know at all, who knew each other at some time, at some place, who had fallen in love with each other.

At the bottom, there's no closure.

“Hi mom.”

He types.

“Thank you. I love you.”

He mindlessly hits keys without pressing them, weighing his next words on his fingertips.

“Hi Joy.”

He types.

“Thank you.”

Closing:

“— your Hal, always.”