

Chapter 2

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Good morning, sir!”

“You both know Chief Yoshida from maintenance. He will be the enlisted representative here. Ensign Makoto, front and center please. Aoba, stand there, thank you.”

Fuyutsuki removed a small box from his pocket and approached Makoto. “For demonstrating great ability at your duties under intense pressure, displaying remarkable ingenuity and creative research potential, and for your work predicting Tapp streams, you have been selected for promotion, effective immediately.” He took the gold bars from the junior officer's collar as he spoke, replacing them with silver. “Congratulations, and a job well done.”

“Thank you, sir.” Makoto bowed formally.

“You're welcome.” Fuyutsuki bowed back.

“Congratulations, son.” Chief Yoshida exchanged formalities as well. “Ensign Aoba, your chair is finished. Come pick it up before COB this evening. Gentlemen.” The chief bowed again, and the two bridge officers reciprocated. Fuyutsuki nodded, and the head maintenance tech left.

“Congratulations, you conniver. Getting a promotion for something you don't understand.”

“Hey, work it if you've got it.”

They grinned at each other. Fuyutsuki raised his eyebrow. “What is this?”

“Sir, Dr Akagi never explained to me what a Tapp stream is. I can predict them within seven meters, but I have no idea what I'm predicting.”

Fuyutsuki looked at him calmly. Dr Akagi's reception certainly didn't surprise him. Still, he glanced at the door through which the chief had left, then at the two young officers, and surprised himself by sinking into an available chair.

“In light of your work, I think I'll alter your security clearance a bit. Take a seat.”

The two exchanged another glance, this one pleasantly surprised. Makoto sank into his chair and got comfortable, while Aoba perched on the edge of his desk.

“About four months ago, just after the arrival of the Third Child but before the subsequent defeat of Sachiel, we ran a series of tests designed to calculate the probability of the Third Child successfully generating an AT field on his first attempt. Though history has vindicated the long shot, at the time the results were not good.” Fuyutsuki let himself relax enough to give the other two a wry grin. They smiled back, curious and attentive. “Compared to other subjects, the chance of him doing it was almost negligible. One oddity we noticed however was that there were certain geographical locations that made AT field generation more probable. These locations usually take the appearance of long tracts of land, or ribbons, and we've taken to calling them Tapp streams. One of which runs right

through the geofront, by a previously unnoticed coincidence. Makoto, you identified a identification feature of this one.”

“Of course, sir. The Pacific Rim subduction zone,” Makoto injected

“Precisely. The Tapp stream that covers the geofront runs the entire length of the Pacific/Asiatic plate junction subduction zone. Question, Aoba?”

“What's a subduction zone?” Aoba asked.

“Where one tectonic plate plunges beneath another is called a subduction zone.”

“Oh. Thank you, sir.”

Fuyutsuki turned and began entering some information on the terminal with precise, clipped movements. When he was complete he turned back to the other two. “Makoto, please bring up the real time Tapp stream plot.”

“I don't have access to that, sir.”

“You do now.”

The other two shared a look, then Makoto bent over his keyboard. A few seconds later, a map of the world emerged on the Magi.

It was spotted with dark blue bubo-like splotches that moved imperceptibly around the world along the grid Makoto's calculations had laid out.

“But what are they?” Aoba asked.

“You've seen a blue pattern before, haven't you?” Fuyutsuki asked with the same wry grin.

“Angels, sir?” Makoto gasped while Aoba exclaimed, “There must be a dozen of them!”

“Not quite angels,” the senior officer dissented. “More specifically, angel-like AT fields. Even more oddly, unlike those generated by their Angelic counterparts, these seem to constructively interfere with the AT fields generated by EVAs yet are totally independent of both EVA and Angel.”

“But, what's creating them?” Aoba asked.

“That, young man, we do not know.”

“Did anyone pursue this?” Makoto was leaning forward on the desk, staring at the screen like a hungry man.

“Yes. You.”

“I mean-”

“I understand.” Fuyutsuki smiled at the two of them, again surprised by how much he was enjoying teaching after all that time. “No, no one did. No one had the budget, the staff, or the resources until now. Other things were always more important.”

“I’ll get right on it, sir!” Makoto promised.

“You too, Aoba. Find something interesting and develop it, and I’ll put you up for promotion as well. You’ve got a very good report from your work with Makoto, and a little more might push you up the ladder.”

“Yes, sir!” Aoba hopped to his feet and bowed.

“And with that, gentlemen, I have other duties. Good luck and keep up the good work.”

“Yes, sir!” Everyone rose and exchanged bows, and Fuyutsuki left.

“Dude, rocks are Angels!”

“You’re a moron.”

“That’s moron, sir, to you.”

“My ass, sir.”

“Damn right it will be your ass.”

“Gentlemen, I want a fourth level bioscan-” Dr Akagi stormed onto the bridge barking orders. The two bolted to their desks to obey, while the good doctor went to her own station and began working as well, fingers flying across the keyboard creating a steady drone of key clacking that stopped only when she needed to drink from the water bottle she kept with her.

One of these times, while she was distracted, Aoba turned to tell her something and promptly forgot what she had to say. In the four days since the last round of tests, he had not seen her. She looked like death. She seemed thinner with dark circles under her eyes. Her roots were the color of her eyebrows, and she was sweating in the cool bridge air. She turned her gaze back to him, catching his with her eyes, brilliant blue eyes that were even brighter than before, unnaturally so in her pale face. Aoba was pinned by her look, paralyzed while he searched for breath.

“--right now, Ensign!” She had been talking while he drowned in her eyes.

“Yes, ma’am!”

The machines clicked and clacked while the MAGI’s cooling system hummed a gentle working song, sliding in and out of the range of audible noises. There was something definitely melodic about the noises, and as usual Makoto allowed himself to enjoy the music while he worked. Calloused fingertips flew across the keyboards, creating a counter harmony. Dr Akagi’s tapping foot kept time.

“Results should be compiled within seventeen minutes, ma’am,” Makoto announced, unconsciously breaking the automated symphony.

“Good. Have them in my box in twenty.”

“Yes-” the door slammed shut behind her. “ma'am.”

Akagi Ritsuko strode along, the look in her eyes scattering others from her way. She arrived at her office and let the door shut hard behind her. A couple of deep breaths later, her muscles relaxed and her shoulders slumped.

“Tell me, will this affect instrumentality?”

“Gendo!”

He sat at her desk, but not in his usual position of imperiousness. His eyes were cool instead of hard. Though his posture was still formal, to Ritsuko he might as well have his feet up and a cigarette twirling between his fingers.

“I have no idea. We've never even theorized what this might mean, other than a mechanical error.” There were no other chairs in here, but she sat on a pile of books that bulged cancerously in the middle. “The sync rating is supposed to be a ratio of how well a human brain connects with the EVAs nerve system compared to how the human brain connects to its own nerves. For a human to have a non-unity sync ratio is undefined. It's dividing by zero.”

Gendo nodded and waited.

“While I was checking the test setup, I took a total of eighteen different measurements. Here, I'll show you.” She rose and walked around the desk to stand beside Gendo, pulling some folders out of the mess on her desk. Her hips were only inches from Gendo's chair, and her back was to him. “Sync tests always have some scatter. Small day to day variations in diet and attitude. Normally we reduce this by extending the testing period to several hours in an identical situation, and doing some basic statistical noise reduction. Noise is reduced by more than half. Three quarters on good days. Normally.”

She turned around and faced Gendo, feeling tired and nervous. The lilt in her voice told him she was defensive. He stared into her eyes while she talked.

“This time, it did better than that. Statistical variation was less than two percent.” She handed him the papers, and he took them without looking away. “He's trending down. Over eight hours his ratio dropped an eighth of a point.”

“So what does that mean?”

“I have no idea. I want to-”

Gendo rose to his feet. Ritsuko didn't move, and when he stood before her their faces were only inches apart. “-conduct some tests with the EVA-”

“Ritsuko.”

“Yes?” she breathed.

“Find out. Then come see me privately. Soon.” She could taste his words and feel them on her lips.

“Yes.”

Gendo turned and walked from the office without looking back. His footsteps made little noise, but the little echoed off the walls, bounced underneath the ceiling lights, and traveled along the spaces between the ceiling tiles like flowing through an aqueduct. Delicate sensors mounted between the sliding panels of automatic doors detected the noise and bore it in dissected bits along copper wires almost a million times faster than air carried the discrete waves. Some of these wires ran down the walls of NERV's headquarters and others raced to the wise men, the MAGI. One ran nowhere, shorting out on a cold water pipe that traveled miles through the ground, meeting up with a pump with a frayed control wire that met the air conditioning unit near where a thermostat line branched off to a control box on the wall of an almost empty room where the sole occupant, Shinji Ikari suddenly sat bolt upright and looked around with a panicky, “Who's there?”

No one was, of course.

Shinji stared around for a moment, listening carefully. He heard the whine of a ceiling fan above him. It was swirling hot air around, already humid and dank with sweat. Shinji picked at his shirt, pulling it away from his skin, and released it so it could stick again. He pulled the phone NERV had issued him from his pocket and opened the address book, scrolling down until he found "Misato-san." He stared at that entry for a long time. Then with a snap he closed the phone and returned his attention to the paperwork in front of him.

"Man, who cares about my stool consistency?" he snorted, then a moment later, louder, "Who cares about any of this crap?" he finally complained.

"Ritsuko, apparently. Hey, tiger."

"Misato!"

She smiled at him and stepped in, letting the pneumatic doors shut with a hiss. "Ack. Why is it so yucky in here?" she looked around discontentedly, picking at her uniform the exact way Shinji had a minute ago.

"I don't know."

"Oh, the thermostat is broken. See, it just has a blinking red light. Come on, let's get out of here and get something to eat."

"The paperwork?"

Misato stopped twiddling with the AC control and walked over to Shinji and examined the documents he was filling out. "Check, check, hey, that's pretty personal," she observed.

"It gets worse-" Shinji began. He stopped suddenly and tried to hide the folder he had been working on.

"What? How? Why?" Misato's curiosity piqued, and she snatched the papers from him.

"Hey! No, don't!"

"Ew!" she exclaimed. "That's disgusting!"

Shinji blushed from the roots of his hair to the soles of his feet.

"They've been making you do this all day?" she asked.

He nodded, unable to speak.

"That's disgusting," she pronounced again, this time more authoritatively. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Since the tests."

"It's a wonder you can eat, with writing all that down."

"It doesn't bother me. I haven't had a chance to eat since breakfast anyway." Shinji desperately wanted her to drop the topic.

"What? Since breakfast? As your commanding officer, I order you to stop filling that out and come with me to the cafeteria. You need dinner, and I need to supervise you to make sure you maintain your strength."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. Come on." She pulled the rest of the documents from his hands and sorted them into two piles. The completed pile she pushed into a pneumatic delivery tube in the wall and sent it away, the rest she dropped into her briefcase. "See, I've got them and you can go back to the joy of your circulatory system as soon as you want. Let's eat. I'm starved."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ma'am? You're killing me, Shinji-kun. Killing me." She rolled her eyes and lead him out the door.

"Sorry, Misato-san."

"Why are you in such a wimpy mood? You've been getting better recently. You were starting to act like a real boy. And now you're all wimpy and apologetic again. Like," she paused suddenly as they got on the elevator. "Shinji, are you having girl problems?"

"What? No!" He yelled as the doors shut with a hiss.

"Good! Because you're saving the world for humanity. The ladies should be after you like white on rice. Ritsuko on a biology sim. Suds on a beer."

“Uh,” Shinji replied.

“So tell me, stud. How are you doing? Got a date for tonight?”

Shinji sighed and gave up. Trapped in the elevator, there would be no way of getting away from her. “No, I don't. I don't really think about that sort of stuff.”

“Well, you should. Maybe we need to take you clothes shopping. Buy some fancy shirts. And beer. Beer works wonders.”

“I can't. I have to redo these sync tests tonight anyway.”

“That's true,” Misato admitted.

They whirred past another few floors.

“Tell me, Shinji. How are you feeling about all this? I know the poking and prodding and paperwork gets old. Trust me, I know how old paperwork gets. I know about paperwork.” Misato developed a thousand yard stare as she said 'paperwork' silently a few times. Then she snapped out of it. “But other than that, how are you? You're feeling okay, right?”

“I'm confused. I really don't understand what's going on.”

“Your sync ratio is dropping.”

“But not with the EVA,” Shinji countered. “I heard that was up.”

“It is,” Misato agreed. “It's up two points since your last test. But with yourself it's dropping.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I don't really know,” Misato admitted. The elevator stopped and the doors hissed open. They started down the hallway. “Basically, signals aren't moving through your nerves as fast as they should. Ritsuko explained it to me, but I kind of spaced out halfway through.”

Shinji looked up at her curiously. She just smiled and shrugged.

“What's going on with her, anyway?” Shinji asked. “She's been acting all funny.”

“I don't know,” Misato admitted. They crossed a side corridor and waited while a couple of workmen were sealing the floor plates. “But I'm sure she'll be fine.”

Shinji nodded seriously, then looked down through the hole in the decking. Neither one of them spoke as the orange coveralled maintenance staffed finished pushing spare duct segments aside and began tightening a square plate with an impact wrench. He bolted it down at the four corners, physically bending the steelwork to do so. The last bolt sealed the hole completely, and Shinji yelped, and stumbled back.

“You okay, tiger?” Misato asked, broken out of her own reverie.

“Yes. Sorry. That last bolt startled me.”

Misato glanced over at the workman then back at him. “What? The first three didn't give you enough warning?” but she tousled his hair so he didn't take it personally. “Come on, I think hunger is getting to you.”

The two of them moved past the workmen, who had now cleared the hallway and were putting away their tools. Underneath their feet the unbroken decking prevented anyone from seeing the air conditioning ducts which ran perpendicular to the course of the hallway until they plunged suddenly straight down hundreds of feet to a massive central unit which had a secondary line that ran laterally into sector four G where it provided an air source for a personal cooling unit that was blasting frigid air into the office of Dr. Ritsuko Akagi who bolted upright in her seat wild eyed.

“Mother, I'm sorr-” She stopped. There was no one in the room with her. “Oh, god. Keep it together.”

She shook her head to clear it. There was a glass of water on her desk that she fumbled for, finally taking a long deep drag ignoring the rim of hoarfrost that had begun to ring the inside. It seemed to clear her head. She rose, idly flicked the thermostat back into the standard range and returned to the two dossiers on her desk.

One was titled, “Third Child, Synchronization Baseline Report.” The second only said, “Divergence Map” and the date.

The folder on Shinji's sync baseline was approximately an inch thick, most with computer printouts full of raw data. Towards the back were a few graphs, all of which were extremely uninteresting to even most educated eye. Ritsuko stared at them until she thought her eyes were beginning to bleed, then scowled and discarded the report. She turned her head to the second folder, but it was almost empty.

Inside was one sheet of paper with fifteen numbers. Nine were in one column, all dates, and the six others were matched up to the first few. Five of these were zeros. The last was simply a “+2.”

Ritsuko stared at this lone slip of paper with all the intensity she had previously directly at Shinji's file. She balefully considered it, compared the two, and penciled remarks on a notepad. She never got more than a few lines along before she tore the paper off and shoved it disgustedly into the incinerator. “It doesn't make any fucking sense.”

Distracted, she lit a cigarette and sucked the smoke down while staring into the reports like answers were buried within the thin sheets. Smoke curled up above her and wafted into the temperature sensor, which shot a puff of cold air. On contact with the colder air the doctor's skin suddenly slicked over with sweat. That faded as the air warmed up.

Later, in Gendo Ikari's secondary office, she reported, “It just doesn't work. The data maps to within a ninety eight percent degree of certainty. But the answers are nonsensical. Even the Magi have been unable to find a correlation.”

“In short, you have no idea why the Third Child's central nervous system is degrading,” he replied.

“We have no reason to believe his nervous system is decaying at all,” she countered. “We have no idea what is happening at all.”

“Is the data adequate?”

“The data is more than adequate,” she assented.

“And the testing facilities are working adequately?” Gendo's voice was soothing, calm, and almost kind. Within it was a bitter lie that Ritsuko's distracted state prevented her from seeing. The commander watched her while he posed simple questions, watched her sunken eyes burn with a feverish intensity as she regurgitated incredible amounts of information on the problem. A smile stole out of his heart, one he carefully manipulated to kindness.

“Then the problem may be user error. The machines seem to be working most adequately.”

Ritsuko nodded slowly. Then he rose and stepped over to her. With one effortless gesture he touched the line of her chin, and turned her eyes up to his. “But perhaps it is merely a question of accuracy. Surely you can answer that?”

“Easily,” she replied. Speaking was hard. She stared up into his eyes while feeling the confidence, the control that radiated out through his fingers into her cold skin. Gendo smiled again, deeper than before, and pulled her in to him. He laid her down and took her there.