

Rommel

NEON GENESIS
EVANGELION: GENOCIDE

PUBLISHING
Studio 3



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“The most important thing we put into any relationship is not what we say or what we do, but what we are.”

—Stephen R. Covey

Genocide 0:04 / Expectations

NERV Major Misato Katsuragi dropped into her chair in the small metal cube that passed for her office and placed her aching head against the desk, wishing she wouldn't have to raise it again for a long time. Like all her other wishes, she knew this one was impossible.

The papers, folders and other office supplies which normally occupied her workspace lay scattered on the floor. In her surge of despair and anger, she had swept them off, not caring in the slightest if they were important or not. She was beyond giving a damn. The truly important things, the people in her life, were already broken and it seemed she couldn't do anything about it.

Misato closed her eyes, feeling like she didn't have the strength to keep them open.

Everything had been so much easier when all she had to do was fight the Angels. Despite its inherent dangers, the battlefield had always produced a sense of emotional certainty in her. Complex human actions reduced themselves to means and ends, black and white, fronts and flanks, offense and defense.

Battles could be predicted, tactics adjusted, and in the end, bullets and blades were always more reliable than feelings.

I should go home, Misato told herself. But she knew she couldn't. Home was the problem, and going there meant she would have to go up to Shinji and Asuka and admit that she had made a mistake. She would have to look in Shinji's face and see all the pain she had heard in his voice when he called her and told her he'd had a fight with Asuka.

"Still moping?"

Misato recognized the voice instantly. She did not even bother to open her eyes to look at Ritsuko Akagi. She heard the blonde woman step into the cubicle, her heels clicking distinctly against the floor.

"Leave me alone," Misato said, her voice a low drawl, weariness showing clearly. She did not lift her head from the desk.

"Isn't that Asuka's line?" She heard Ritsuko pull a chair and sit in front of her desk. "This place is a mess. You did that?" There was a pause, then something that could have been a sigh. "Misato, you really shouldn't be so emotional about—"

"Please. Not now, Ritsuko. I'm begging you."

Ritsuko went quiet, but it seemed like she had been expecting more from Misato, and when nothing came she added in an unusually sympathetic tone, "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

Misato snickered. The sound was loaded with bitterness, bordering on resentment. "With you? You have no idea how funny that sounds."

"I don't hear you laughing."

Laughter—Misato would have given anything to hear Shinji laugh right now. She would give anything to see Asuka smile. She didn't know why, but some of the best things in her life had become attached to the children; her surrogate and hopelessly dysfunctional family.

"You were right. I should have listened to you, Ri-chan," Misato said after a moment, bracing herself for the admonishment she knew would be coming from her so-called friend. She had already told Ritsuko about the fight, obviously, in as much detail as she had managed to get out of Shinji. "You always know best."

"You couldn't have predicted this would happen, Misato." Ritsuko said, and for a second her comforting tone threw Misato for a loop.

Suddenly, not believing this could be the same person whose inhumanity she'd come to despise, Misato opened her eyes. The bright light of her office hurt for a second as she cast her gaze across the desk. Sure enough, it was Ritsuko Akagi in front of her, clad in her familiar white lab coat and wearing a strangely comforting expression on her face.

Seeing that and not the expected wall of cold animosity, Misato realized she couldn't hold on to her anguish any longer.

"I don't know what to do, Ritsuko." Her words were almost a plea. "They are really gonna end up killing each other. I can't watch them all the time. I can't make them like each other. I can't even talk to Asuka without her hating me. I wish there was a way. I wish I could just ... reach her. But I can't."

"If you think there's no other way, then I guess we should separate them for their own safety," Ritsuko suggested. "I can get Asuka a place inside Central Dogma with just a phone call. It should not be a problem as far as housing is concerned. We currently have a lot of room from staff departures."

For their own safety, Misato repeated, feeling utterly heartbroken that such a statement even needed to be said. She shook her head.

“I don’t think she’d like to live underground.
And leaving her alone . . .”

“Or I could give her a prescription,” Ritsuko said, but when she saw Misato’s incredulous face, she added, “I mean, if you think her mood has become a problem. It wouldn’t be healthy or productive for her to go around while displaying violent symptoms of personality disorder.”

“Asuka doesn’t have a personality disorder. And I’m not going to have her medicated.” Misato shook her head more firmly, determined to avoid anything which could hurt the troublesome redhead more than help her. It was true that she’d offered Asuka sleeping pills, but there was a big difference between those and full-blown antidepressants or mood stabilizers. “No, it’ll likely only make things worse. Besides, I DARE you to make her take anything she doesn’t want to. You’d have an easier time trying to get an aircraft carrier to stop on a dime.”

Ritsuko didn’t really have a sense of humor, but she did give Misato a grin. “I suppose you are right. You know her better than me. But you can’t ignore that she has a chronic anger problem, likely linked to depression stemming from her failure with Unit-02 and possibly related to Shinji.”

“She needs counseling and understanding, not chemicals. Your drugs won’t fix the problem. They will just hide it.”

Ritsuko had enough sense to refrain from arguing her point. She pressed her lips together and thought. “Well, what about staying at a hotel? She already commutes to school and here by train. It would just be a longer trip. It wouldn’t be permanent, only until an apartment could be procured.”

Misato had already considered that possibility, and already dismissed it. “I don’t want her to be alone,” she said. “I think maybe I should try to get her to stay with a friend. Someone she won’t try to kill.”

“I imagine that’s a very short list.”

A very short list indeed, Misato thought. Asuka, for all her outgoing flamboyance, didn’t really have any friends. Of course, it didn’t really help that she acted like she was better than everyone else. Were she not as pretty, people would simply ignore her rather than put up with her. That said quite a lot about just how unlikeable Asuka was.

Then there was Shinji—shy, withdrawn, bordering on reclusive. And yet he, unlike Asuka, did have people around him; people who cared about what happened to him and who would stay at his side through good times and bad. Because at least he allowed them to stay.

Misato had always believed she was doing the right thing in bringing Asuka home. She thought it was for the best, for her and those around her, and that with a little time Asuka would accept the kindness others were willing to show her and feel better. But in the end all she had really done was place an unfair burden on Shinji’s reluctant shoulders rather than taking responsibility for her own actions. And it was Shinji who paid the price.

“You are not leaving yourself a lot of options.” After a long silence, the reproachful tone she had expected finally appeared in Ritsuko’s voice. “I understand you have reservations, and your reasons are sound, but you are not going to find a solution that makes you happy. Not with something like this. You have to settle for the best option out of a bunch of bad ones.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Misato replied sharply.
“You don’t care. But it’s not my happiness that matters here.”

“This isn’t about anyone’s happiness. You know that.”

Misato said nothing. Of course she knew,
just as she knew Ritsuko was right. The trouble lay in figuring out
which among the bad options was best.
Staying home wouldn’t work. Asuka had to go somewhere else.

“Misato, if you can’t decide then there’s not much I can do to help
with this,” Ritsuko added, quickly noticing the other woman’s
reluctance. “I’m sure you would agree that human relations isn’t my
area of expertise. Never has been. Give me a computer and an
on-off switch and I’m all set. But you are their guardian.
You took that responsibility. There’s no changing that now.
They’re your children. It’s your call.”

“They’re not my children.” Misato felt awful
just having to say that. “I’m their commanding officer.
I never have been more than—”

“Don’t be so ridiculous. Everyone in this place knows what they
are. Hell, at least your children talk. Mine just meow
and scratch if you don’t feed them and are always moody.”

“So . . . almost exactly like Asuka?” Misato chuckled despite
herself. She imagined a small angry cat with orange fur,
pointy ears, and blue eyes under a very nasty frown.
And also very long and bloody claws.

“Well, I did make the comparison before,” Ritsuko reminded her.
“It was fitting then and it’s fitting now.
Some behavior is pure nature, regardless of species.”

Misato wondered if perhaps she should be bothered by Ritsuko comparing Asuka to an animal, again, but given how important her cats were to her she knew it wasn't meant as an insult. And she was here, which meant she was genuinely worried about the children or Misato, or maybe both.

"You know, you are such a good liar, Ritsuko Akagi," Misato said after a moment. She leaned back in her seat and met the other woman's steady gaze. "You walk around making everyone think you don't have a heart, but you are really a big softie. Deep down. Very deep down."

Ritsuko made a face which indicated she didn't quite agree, but just as she was about to reply, Misato heard a strange humming noise. The blonde reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a vibrating pager.

"Duty calls," Ritsuko got to her feet.

"It's the 21st Century, Ritsuko. The most amazing human minds have got together and invented these things called cell phones. Even children carry them. You can actually talk to people on them."

Ritsuko shrugged. She casually slid the pager back into her coat and turned her attention to Misato again.

"What makes you think I want to talk to people?" Her face hardened. "Just so we are clear, when you decide what to do, please make sure to let me know. I must be able to get in touch with Asuka. Unit-02 might not be functional at the moment, but it is still important, and we can't afford to let Asuka sit idle."

Pursing her lips, Misato fought against the notion that this might have been Ritsuko's real reason for coming down here in the first place.

"I will. This won't interfere with your project. Err, schedule. Whatever it is."

"Please see to it that it doesn't, Misato," Ritsuko said. "The Commander is displeased enough with the Lazarus setbacks. Problems with the children are the last thing we need now. It's important that we stick to our schedule."

"It would be easier to make decisions if I had more information." Misato frowned. "For example, when are you going to tell me exactly what's going on? There are no more Angels. Or at least that's what we were told. Why the rush?"

"Angels are not the worst that can happen to us now," Ritsuko said, and Misato suspected it would have been easier to get answers from rock.

"Evangeliions exist to fight Angels," Misato pointed out. She tried not sounding angry, but it was close. "If not Angels, then what are we supposed to fight? Will I have to ask these kids to kill people? I deserve to know."

"Don't worry about it for now. I wouldn't keep any mission-critical information from you, if only on the basis that I'm not a tactician and tactical abilities are and will continue to be required in the near future. The Commander understands that too."

Misato rose to her feet and locked her dark eyes with Ritsuko's, leaning forward over her desk. "In other words, you'll just ring your little bell when you need me."

"That's how hierarchy works. Your problem is that you've always made it personal." The blonde doctor shook her head and smiled weakly. "You look like crap, Misato." She reached out with a hand and tousled Misato's long purple hair. "Asuka and Shinji are not the only ones you should be concerned about. Get yourself some rest."

“Nah, I think I’d rather have a beer.” Misato pulled back, her lips twisted, and ran a hand through her hair, making a show fixing it up. “A really cold one.”

“I thought you quit.”

Misato smiled ruefully. “I did. Unfortunately.”

Ritsuko made a disapproving face. She said nothing as she turned around and headed through the door into the hallway beyond, heels clicking away into silence. Once again Misato dropped onto her chair and returned her head to her desk, replaying the options Ritsuko had given her along with her own objections.

Then she reached into one of her desk drawers and pulled out a small address book. Had she been a better guardian, she couldn’t help thinking, she would have already programmed the number she was looking for into her phone. She had just never had the time. Never bothered.

A name and corresponding number stared at her from the tiny page—her last resort. It was either this or Asuka would have no choice but to be alone. Only one person would take her in, as she had done before.

So, feeling ashamed that she would have to ask this again, Misato called Hikari Horaki.



The images appeared on the tactical holographic display table in groups of three and in four different rows. They were all taken during a span of fifteen minutes as the satellite's camera made a pass four hundred kilometers overhead. A grid had been laid on top of the landscape in each image, outlining topographical contours and enhancing blurry shapes into high-resolution images. Two rulers for scale framed the top and left sides of the display, along with helpful labels depicting altitude, latitude, and longitude.

Closer examination of each image showed a massive industrial complex surrounded by a sprawling network of roads and railway lines like the spokes on a wheel, leading to a massive pyramid-shaped central structure. The pyramid was black, with a red cap at the top. From a different angle, they might have been able to see the yellow star on the red flag hoisted above the capstone.

To the north of the pyramid, a strange, enormously large humanoid shape was shown being rolled along one of the rail lines in a transport car, its contours distinctive despite the fact that it had been covered in black tarps. They might as well have tried to hide a battleship.

Sub-Commander Kozo Fuyutsuki made an effort to remember everything he knew about this operation, but it wasn't until he saw the time stamp in the upper right corner that it clicked.

"Can we confirm that the Chinese Branch has advanced their schedule?" Fuyutsuki asked, leaning closer over the table, hoping that perhaps he wasn't seeing what he suspected. But there was no doubt.

The humanoid shape was an Evangelion, the Chinese-made Unit-A, and it was being transported far earlier than it was supposed to.

“Yes,” Commander Ikari said with the slightest nod of his head. “Our agent tells me that they will be ready for the first activation test within the week, possibly even sooner than that. That is more than two months ahead of schedule.”

We are going to die, was Fuyutsuki’s first reaction. It was quickly followed by, *It should not be a surprise they would stab us in the back*.

Ikari wasn’t poring over the photographs. It was likely, Fuyutsuki realized, that he had studied them in advance, or that he simply knew enough to make any visual evidence unnecessary. He stood away from the table, partially shrouded in the shadows produced by the room’s dim lighting.

Fuyutsuki, so close to the table, was lit in its white-blue glow, turning his face paler than normal and at the same time seeming to accent the many recessed lines created by age and years of loss.

To his immediate right stood Doctor Ritsuko Akagi, her angular face equally lit, green eyes fixed on the table. Much younger, her features showed signs of constant worry and the usual lack of sleep. The shadows under her eyes seemed deeper than they should have been. She remained quiet as she examined the evidence laid before her with a keen green gaze. Fuyutsuki gave her a glance, and couldn’t help the thought that, save for her pale blonde hair, it could have been Naoko standing next to him. Just as it had been in the beginning.

Fighting a pang of nostalgia, Fuyutsuki returned his attention to more pressing matters, to the images in front of him and the danger they represented.

“Do we know that they intend to activate it?” It was likely an unnecessary question, but he hoped to be proven wrong. His hopes were swiftly, predictably dashed.

“We have reason to believe that a pilot has been selected,” Ikari said. “Nothing too specific for now, only that certain arrangements have been made similar to our own selection and preparation procedures. They have an expansive intelligence department.”

*The first victim, Fuyutsuki thought, grimly.
And not the last by any means.*

“Obviously they did not go to Marduk,” Doctor Akagi commented. She had not spoken since entering the room a few minutes ago and taking her place around the display. Her voice was sharp, betraying no emotion whatsoever. She was like her mother in that regard too.

Fuyutsuki turned his head to her. His eyes narrowed.
“What about core viability?”

“They wouldn’t have selected a pilot without a working core,” the bleached blonde doctor said. “Or at least a core they believe they can work with. Otherwise, this would be a rather pointless exercise.”

“They would know Marduk is not reliable,” Ikari said from the shadows. “The pilot in itself is not relevant at this point. My main concern is whether or not they intend to use the Tablet for the activation.”

Doctor Akagi nodded. “We have to assume so. There’s no reason they wouldn’t. We have given assurances as to its reliability.”

“All lies, of course,” Fuyutsuki muttered despite himself, a cold trickle of fear running down his back. “Can we be ready in, what, five days? Seven days?”

Doctor Akagi was already shaking her head. “It doesn’t matter. The answer is no.” She turned to Ikari. “You knew they would try to do something like this, didn’t you? That’s why you wanted Rei’s first test to run the Tablet’s software without waiting for proper analysis. It’s why you’ve been pushing Unit-02 so hard even though its pilot is mentally fried. You knew they would—”

“No,” Ikari cut her off. “I did not know. I expected they would try to advance their schedule, that is true. Greedy men eager for power are seldom patient. But I expected they would advance it by a week. Two weeks at the most. That left us plenty of time.”

“Well, you were only half wrong, if that serves as consolation. It’s two *months*.” Doctor Akagi shook her head. “We are stretched thin as it is. We can’t be ready for this.”

“We must,” Ikari said. He turned his attention fully to the doctor now. The lenses of his glasses reflected back the light and seemed to glow a solid white, hiding his eyes. “Doctor, I want you to suspend everything else and focus on getting Unit-00 operational. Lazarus should take absolute priority. Nothing is as important. Revert to the old configuration as soon as possible and schedule a second activation.”

“Rei is still in the hospital,” Doctor Akagi said. “The effects of the previous contact have not been fully diagnosed.”

“Is she physically capable of piloting Unit-00?” Ikari asked coldly.

“Her body recovers very quickly.”

The reply didn’t answer the question directly, Fuyutsuki noted. Doctor Akagi always gave a sense of detached indifference when it came to Rei, even though the girl’s well-being was her personal responsibility. To her, Rei Ayanami had never had any intrinsic value as a human being.

Indeed, she openly challenged that definition in some of her more contentious reports. As far as she was concerned, Rei served only as a science project; something to be observed from a distance, to be analyzed and experimented on, but not to be sympathized with or become attached to. None of that changed the fact that they needed her.

And Ritsuko Akagi seemed to despise her all the more for it.

“Then Rei’s health status should be no obstacle,” Ikari said. “Lieutenant Ibuki is still looking for the root of the activation problems. She believes it’s because of the complexity of the new programming, does she not? That should provide us with a plausible pretext for the overhaul.”

“People are bound to ask uncomfortable questions,” Doctor Akagi said. “Major Katsuragi in particular. I’m not sure how long I can keep lying to her.”

“It won’t matter in a few days unless we exert the greatest effort,” Ikari replied. “We have no choice. The current situation has to be dealt with first and foremost. Katsuragi’s questions can wait.”

Fuyutsuki drew down his brow at the Commander’s answer. *That’s the same sort of dismissive attitude that landed us in his mess,* he thought. *Even the best lies are a poor shield over time.*

He kept that criticism to himself, knowing that while it would reinforce his previously correct assessment, it still offered no solution. And, in this case, providing the Emerald Tablet to the Chinese had been both necessary and a calculated risk. They had to be given something to ensure their cooperation as long as NERV needed it. But they were also given specific instructions and timelines.

Ikari had not trusted the Chinese Sixth Branch to do entirely as they were told, obviously, but he had depended on them to follow the schedule within some reasonable approximation and dismissed the idea that they were far too ambitious to do as they were bid. Fuyutsuki had warned against it, among other issues. Now that he was proven right, the Sub-Commander might have called it predictable. Mankind in general had seldom shown restraint after attaining the capability to wield new, powerful weapons. Japan knew that better than anyone and bore the scars.

In Ikari's mind, however, the Chinese would realize that they stood to gain so much more by their compliance to NERV's directives—and his own personal authority—that any disobedience ran contrary to the logic of the situation. Such complacency could now prove just as deadly a sin as allowing them access to the Tablet in the first place. Under normal circumstances, a standard activation by the Chinese Branch would not trouble anyone in this room. However, the use of the Tablet in that activation changed everything.

Nothing more needed to be said. Everyone present understood they were in a race for their lives, and likely, every life on the planet. Everyone present also knew they were not ready to win that race.

“With your permission, then, I will assemble a team and proceed with Unit-00's re-fit,” Doctor Akagi said. “I would much rather get started sooner than later. I will also look into clearing Rei for a second activation test as soon as possible. Unless you have any objections.”

Ikari looked at her sternly for a moment, a look that was both a warning and permission.

“No objections.”

As Doctor Akagi stepped back from the table and headed to the door, Ikari turned to Fuyutsuki. "Maintain a link to the UN's spy satellites and keep an eye on our Chinese friends.

I don't want any more nasty surprises."

"As ordered," the Sub-Commander answered.

"Should we alert the Security Council?"

Ikari thought about his answer for a long, silent moment, his face stony as he weighed the enormity of the decision he was required to make.

In a strange way, Fuyutsuki felt relieved seeing his superior take his time. He had always known Gendo Ikari was not the heartless maniac people seemed to think. Whatever impressions others might take from him, Ikari chose to see the world in terms of means and ends rather than merely efficient brutality.

But it was reassuring to have it confirmed during a crisis like this. Decisions like this should never be made lightly.

Finally, after another full minute of silent deliberation,

Ikari shook his head and said heavily,

"No. Foreknowledge denotes complicity."

Fuyutsuki nodded without saying a word. Sacrifices had to be made, and they could be terrible in scope.

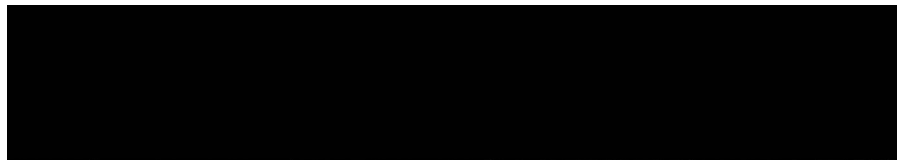
It was only to be expected under such dire circumstances.

He had understood that from the beginning. So had Yui.

And what will happen when we run out of things to sacrifice?

NERV's Sub-Commander wondered.

Will that be the day we are victorious, or the day the world ends?





“Asuka’s gone to school,” Misato said softly from the doorway. She meant for her voice to be comforting, Shinji was sure, but he felt no comfort from it. “She’ll be staying with Hikari for now. I don’t know if she’ll be coming back.”

It was early in the morning, around the time when Shinji would normally be up and getting ready for school. Asuka would be on his heels, barking orders left and right. Make breakfast, prepare bentos, put your shoes on—normal stuff like that. Misato would look at them from the kitchen table, shaking her head and wondering how they managed to make it work every day.

They didn’t. They never had. Their interactions were the result of their characters, hers domineering and his subservient, and coexisted only because they had to. They had never managed to come to terms with one another; not as teens, not as roommates, not even as Eva pilots. Was it surprising at all, then, that they couldn’t live together?

With no Asuka to hound him and no desire to rise, Shinji still lay on his bed, facing the wall so that his back was to Misato. His S-DAT had died during the night, but even then, he hadn’t felt like getting up and finding batteries. From that point on, his only companion had been the silence as he waited in vain for sleep to relieve him of his hurt.

He’d already been awake for hours when Misato knocked on his bedroom door. Hearing no reply, she quietly slid it open. Unlike Asuka, he’d never bothered installing a lock. He wished now that he had.

Misato was looking at him, and he could almost feel the pity in her eyes. He could sense it across the room like the beam of a flashlight.

And it made the guilt harder to bear. He didn't deserve her pity—if she only knew what he'd said to Asuka she wouldn't pity him. Even if she knew the redhead had said it to him first, even if she knew Asuka had tried to strangle him. She would despise him, too.

I don't deserve anything else. I hit Asuka. I made her cry.

Behind him, he heard Misato sigh, finally realizing he wasn't going to answer her.

"Shinji, I understand that some things are hard to talk about. But that doesn't mean you should keep them to yourself. And you do have people around you who are willing to listen. You can say anything and I won't judge you. I promise."

She paused, perhaps to give him a chance to say something. To refute her, maybe, or to tell her how she was wrong and he was alone.

But what was the point in saying those things? In saying anything? It didn't even matter if he was alone or not. He FELT alone. And that was the only way he should feel after what he'd said and done to Asuka.

"Maybe you could go see Rei," Misato suggested. "I think she's well enough for visits. I'm sure she'd like to have you around. It'd make her feel better for sure. Don't worry about school today, I'll make something up. That always works."

Shinji kept staring at the wall. He could not, however, ignore the fact that Rei would indeed be someone—the only one—he could talk to without feeling worse than he did now. Everyone else would drive the stake of guilt deeper. Rei Ayanami would just listen.

Rei—it was because he defended her that Asuka had gotten upset in the first place. What else was he supposed to do?

Shinji could tolerate Asuka being abusive towards him—her insults and her punches had become the routine—but for her to treat Rei, who couldn't even defend herself, that way was more than even the human doormat could bear.

He had done it without thinking, yet he had only thrown Asuka's own words back at her. They were hurtful words, but they were HER words. She had only been on the receiving end of the same kind of spite she used on everyone else. That was what it felt like to have someone tell you they hated you, that they wanted you to die. Like she had done to Rei.

But if that logic was true, why did it feel so wrong? Why had it made him cry? Why did it make Asuka cry?

Because it was me who said them. I was supposed to help her. I was supposed to be her friend. I was supposed to care. Instead, I hurt her.

"This is just like what happened with that boy, isn't it?" Misato continued to talk, as if her words could somehow make everything better. She didn't understand at all. "You felt like it was your fault, even though nobody wanted to blame you. I'm not your mother, Shinji. I know that. I'm not going to tell you everything will be alright when I'm not sure it will be. But what I can tell you is that it will never get better unless you decide to make an effort."

"His name was Kaworu," Shinji said suddenly. It was the first time he spoke to her that morning, and the first time he spoke of his white-haired friend. "That boy—his name was Kaworu."

"Shinji, he was an Angel."

"He had a name!"

Misato fell silent for a moment. Then she said softly, "Okay. Kaworu. Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you." She hesitated.

“Just think about what I said, okay? Don’t let this be like before. You don’t have to. You are not alone.”

Shinji heard her move away, the sound of her footsteps slightly muted by her stockings. His bedroom door slid closed. Misato would be going to work and probably wouldn’t be coming back until very late, or until tomorrow, maybe even the day after that. For all practical purposes, she was out of his life.

And he knew he could say the same about Asuka.

Instead of helping, that made him feel even worse. Shinji buried his face in his pillow and bit his lip, hoping the pain would distract him from the other hurts. It didn’t. He bit down harder.



In the empty classroom, Hikari Horaki’s sigh seemed to carry on forever.

No one in school could ever say that it was unusual for her to stay after class for clean-up duty. She did it at least once a week, and often twice or three times as needed. But she didn’t always like it. And sometimes, she only stayed reluctantly. Today, for example, she was especially reluctant.

The call from Major Misato Katsuragi the night before had been a surprise, even if it wasn’t the first time Hikari received one. And she had known, before the NERV Major began explaining, that it couldn’t be anything good. It certainly wasn’t. Asuka and Shinji had a fight, and Asuka would be needing a new place she could move into, again. Major Katsuragi wouldn’t say over what the fight was about, or what made it so nasty that they couldn’t live together anymore.

That Asuka and Shinji were always arguing and fighting like an old married couple—much like she and Toji had, and still did whenever she visited him in the hospital—was something the whole school had learned to live with. Fights between them were as common as the rain in spring. But from the strain on Major Katsuragi's voice, Hikari could tell this was different.

Whatever the reasons, Hikari didn't hesitate. Yes, she would gladly take Asuka in. The Major thanked her sincerely and stated she would arrange for some of the redhead's belongings to be taken over.

Things didn't go quite so smoothly after that.

When do they ever go smoothly with Asuka and Shinji?
Hikari thought dourly. *Never. That's when.*

Shinji, Major Katsuragi had informed her, would not be going to school. However, Asuka would meet her like any other day. The problem was that, up until now, the German girl hadn't shown up like she was supposed to. Actually, none of the three children attended. And Hikari had gone from worried, to utterly mortified. It would be the second time Asuka went missing on her.

No matter how much she stressed out about her grades, or giving detentions, assigning duties and reprimands, Hikari was aware that such problems were trifles when compared to Asuka's. Even if she had managed to pull herself together and lead a somewhat normal life after what had happened to her—and Hikari thought she deserved a lot of credit for that, even admiration—she was not and never could be a normal girl.

She had been there when Asuka finally broke down. Having never experienced the kind of trauma the redhead had endured, she could not really relate to her on the sort of level she would've wanted. She could not understand. And as Asuka cried herself to sleep that night many months ago,

Hikari had been utterly unable to comfort her. She had felt useless and undeserving. There she was, supposedly caring for someone, and yet she did nothing in the end. She was the worst sort of friend.

Then Asuka ran away. She had been a shell by then, not eating or going to school or even speaking and just sitting in front of the TV all day playing video games. Hikari barely managed to drag her out of bed in the morning, but the bright and animated girl she had befriended was already gone.

Without her Eva, Asuka had told her, she had no reason to live. No reason to care about anything. The next day Section 2 had come looking for her in school. That was how Hikari found out she was missing.

That was why she worried so much now.

“Miss Horaki?”

“Uh?” Hikari jerked her head, snapping out of her reverie and turning to the pony-tailed brunette now occupying the desk next to hers.

Keiko Nagara looked serious, her young features drawn, leaning back against the edge of the desk. Her brunette hair was slightly lighter in color than Hikari’s and she had no freckles, but they could have been sisters. More than once this had led to confusion among students and even teachers.

Hikari had never liked that. Keiko was not the sort of girl you wanted to be associated with. The last Hikari had seen of her she’d gone with the others to return the cleaning supplies, leaving her to sit alone in the classroom, her hands on her lap holding her flip cell phone.

“We put everything back,” Keiko said. “Kaz and Aida already left, but I thought you should know.”

“Thank you,” Hikari said, forcing a smile before lowering her gaze to the phone in her hands once more. “You can go now.”

That should have been the end of it. Hikari had nothing else to say and it was getting late, but she failed to account for Keiko’s curiosity. “Is there something wrong?” the pony-tailed girl asked.

“No.”

Keiko inched closer, with all the care and caution of someone who knew she was intruding, and yet also unwilling to let things go.

“Miss Horaki, I know it’s none of my business, but you’ve been asking everyone if they’ve seen Asuka. And, well, you asked me twice,” Keiko hesitantly held up two fingers, “I’m not dumb. I can tell something’s going on. Nobody asks me anything unless they are desperate, and no one asks twice even if they are. And Asuka didn’t come to school today, so if anyone knows what’s going on, it’s you.”

“Why do you even care?” Hikari said. She fixed the other girl with a stern gaze. “It’s not like she’s your friend.”

Keiko shrunk back, and the hurt look that came over her face made Hikari despise herself for the sudden harshness of what she had just said. She knew Keiko openly admired Asuka, as did many other students—some, particularly the males, for very selfish and dubious reasons—but it still surprised her that she’d bother asking so bluntly given how Asuka treated her in return.

The simple fact was that Asuka “tolerated” the other girls only because she couldn’t shun them if she wanted to be the center of attention. She almost didn’t have a choice on the matter—idols needed fans to make them idols, after all. In exchange, she was practically worshiped. But that same tolerance just didn’t seem to apply to Keiko Nagara, and she constantly found herself on the outside looking in.

Being the alpha-female of their group, Asuka behaved in a specially vile way towards her, gleefully putting her down in front of the other girls as if that would serve to reinforce her own status. The others, of course, were keen to follow her example. Yet Keiko usually ignored or just refused to accept the truth. She was clearly not wanted and continued to try nudging into Asuka's circle like some abused puppy looking for affection.

If she was being honest, Hikari thought it was a little sad.

Either she's dumb or desperate, but it really doesn't matter.

"I'm sorry," Keiko murmured, lowering her head.
"I won't bother you anymore."

As the other girl turned to leave, Hikari got to her feet. "Keiko, wait," she said hurriedly, softening her tone. Her words brought Keiko to a halt. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just . . . You are right. I'm worried about Asuka."

"It's okay, Miss Horaki," Keiko said lightheartedly, waving a hand. It was a front—Hikari had enough experience to tell. "I'm sure Asuka has a good reason to cut class. She is an Eva pilot, you know."

There was no way Hikari could miss the awe in the other girl's voice, nor the sudden admiring twinkle in her eyes. It made her wonder if Keiko might like Asuka as the boys did. That would explain a few things.

"Yeah, I know," Hikari said after a moment. "This isn't about that. She was supposed to move in with me today."

"Really?" Keiko's brown eyes opened so wide it made Hikari uncomfortable.

Hikari just nodded. *I shouldn't have said anything. Asuka is gonna be angry, and she should be. This is no one else's business but the two of us and maybe Major Katsuragi.*

“Well then, you need to get going!” Keiko said.

Hikari frowned. It just didn’t seem right for Keiko to be so concerned over someone who always treated her badly, and who would very much not return the favor. Either Keiko was faking her concern or didn’t understand what being disliked was all about.

“I can’t,” Hikari said. Her frustration was growing, but she did her best to keep it off her voice. “I was supposed to meet her in school. She might come in. If I’m not here, then I’ll miss her completely.”

“I think if she was going to come in, she would be here already,” Keiko countered. She pressed her lips in thought. “Listen, I’ve got an idea. You can go. I’ll stay, and if I see Asuka I’ll send her to your place.”

“What about your parents? Isn’t anyone waiting for you at home?”

“That’s fine,” Keiko assured her. “It’s only my guardian, and she always works late.”

“You’ll still get into trouble. The administration doesn’t like students hanging around after class without a good reason.”

Keiko brushed her off. “I’ll just explain what’s going on. The teachers like me anyway. One of the advantages of always being picked on.”

Suddenly, Hikari thought she understood—Keiko offering to help her had less to do with the fact that she thought Hikari should go find Asuka and more to do with her being Asuka’s best friend. No doubt she hoped the redhead would hear about her helpfulness from the mouth of someone who she trusted and liked enough to move in with.

Hikari came within a heartbeat of telling her she would do no such thing when her concern for Asuka won out.

Misguided it might be, but it was still an option. And one Hikari could turn to her advantage.

“Okay.” She nodded. “Let’s do it your way. You stay, I go.”

Keiko gave her a smile, making Hikari feel strangely guilty for taking advantage of her willingness to befriend Asuka at any cost. Maybe she should put in a few good words with Asuka on her behalf—no, she definitely would. When she found her.

“Thank you,” Hikari said, and found that she meant it. She was glad for that, although belatedly; life was too short to hold grudges or get mad at people over such petty things. “I’ll call you back, too. So you don’t have to wait all night.”

“Deal!”

With at least one of her problems solved, Hikari exited the classroom and headed for her locker. She quickly keyed her combination into the lock, toed off her rubber-soled slippers and changed them for her outdoor shoes, hurriedly grabbing her book bag in the process. Then she slammed the locker door closed again and headed to the school’s front gate, walking as briskly as she could without actually running.

Once outside, the late afternoon sun beating down on her, Hikari glanced at her cell phone and checked for messages just in case. Her mailbox was empty. No calls or messages. And she had a signal.

I hope she didn’t wander off again, she thought, feeling something tighten in her chest. Asuka, I want to help, but you have to give me a chance.

The narrow sidewalk leading away from the school bustled with students, mostly due to the multitude of shops still open. There were also a few salarymen mixed in with the younger crowd, along with some construction workers who seemed to be everywhere these days.

Hikari carefully avoided running into people as she walked in front of the small arcade located on the corner nearest to the pedestrian crosswalk. The place was popular with most students, providing a welcome break after enduring a day full of schoolwork, lectures and teachers. Hikari had never been big on video games herself—the only reason she even bought a console was for dating sims—but Asuka and her had hung out there a few times, sometimes along with Shinji and Kensuke.

Even if she didn't like video games, such playful moments were few and far between and she had thoroughly enjoyed them. Toji was the only one missing. Hikari always wished he could be there with them. He loved video games.

Soon I can go visit him again. Hikari smiled. Just another week. I'll bring him some takoyaki this time.

Wanting something to remind her of her not-yet-official boyfriend, she peered wistfully through the front window, and she immediately recognized the figure leaning over one of the flashy, loud machines—her golden-red hair and pointy scarlet hair clips gave her away.

Asuka was wearing her uniform, too, meaning she had indeed left for school that morning as her guardian said she would. Hikari sighed, her heart feeling like it had plunged down to her feet. She reached into her bag and took out her phone. Keiko answered on the first ring.

"It's me," she told the other girl. "I found her. Thanks. Please go home."

"You did? I can go join—"

Hikari hung up, closed her eyes, took a deep breath and then made her way inside the arcade. There were only a few other students in the noisy space, and most were giving the frowning

redheaded girl a wide berth. With good reason. She looked . . . like someone who didn't want anyone around her. Hikari noticed she was playing some kind of Eva-inspired shooting game called "Angel Takedown," which seemed oddly fitting.

"Asuka?" Hikari called out to her distracted friend while she approached, thinking it would be unwise to startle someone who was both volatile and combat-trained.

Asuka turned her head at the sound of Hikari's voice. Her eyes were dull, so much so that they seemed a completely different shade of blue. They were the eyes, Hikari recognized at once, of someone who had been through a deeply personal tragedy. She could hardly believe this was the same cheerful, outgoing girl she had always known. And yet it was not the first time she saw her like this.

The heartbreaking difference was that before it had been an Angel who attacked her. Asuka had endured that and came back. So how could a mere fight with Shinji Ikari have done this to her?

"Uh . . . hi, Hikari." Asuka forced herself to smile.

"Hi." Checking the arcade screen, Hikari noticed the initials ALS held all of the Top Ten scoring records—all time-stamped within the last few hours. "Ah, did . . . Did you go to school at all?" She tried to sound casual, but it was impossible. "I've been really worried. Major Katsuragi told me that—"

"School didn't seem important," Asuka said flatly. She returned her attention to the game, moving the controls with short, practiced movements. "I don't really care about it."

"I thought something happened to you."

Asuka did not reply to that.

Hikari swallowed awkwardly, uncertain of how far she should allow her curiosity to push the issue. She waited until Asuka finished the level before trying again, “Asuka, I know something bad happened. Major Katsuragi told me that you and Shinji ... had problems.”

Her friend stared at the next loading screen, ignoring her. Hikari found more meaning in the heavy silence that followed than on any words Asuka might utter. The German redhead might be many things, but coy was certainly not one of them by any stretch. And she didn’t usually avoid a subject as deliberately as she was doing now—she’d try to deflect attention, denying that something was bothering her while haughtily claiming she was fine. This time there was no such pretense.

This time she was hurt, and it showed.

She wasn’t going to get to Asuka like this, Hikari realized. She might be her closest friend but that didn’t mean she understood her or what she was going through, never had and probably never would. She had to find another way.

“You know I’ve been really wanting to talk to you for a long time. About what happened before with the Eva in the city. But it’s not really important now, I guess. Ever since you came out of the hospital, I’ve just been glad to have you around.” Hikari paused and smiled amicably. “And I’m glad we are going to be roommates again.” She reached out a hand intuitively in a gesture of support.

Asuka quickly pulled her own hand away. “I told Misato not to bother you with this. I don’t want to go anywhere with you or anyone else. Just leave me alone.”

Then she turned her head, no longer focusing on the flashing screen but on the window beyond. Hikari could not see her eyes or her expression, only her stiff body language. The young Class Representative was not at all discouraged by this behavior.

Any of the girls who merely hung around Asuka for her looks and their own status would have given up right then and there, thinking her a lost case and not worth the trouble. But Hikari was not one of them; where other girls might admire Asuka for her popularity and discard her the moment she became a problem, Hikari had long ago gotten used to the burdens which came with the redhead's particular friendship. This was, partially at least, a result of always playing second fiddle to Asuka, and from being one of the few people—perhaps the only one—who'd seen her at her lowest.

Of course, that wasn't because Asuka had made it easier for her than for anyone else. In fact, Hikari had always suspected, although she'd never confirmed, that the only reason the instantly popular Eva pilot had been drawn to befriend her in the first place was because of her position as an authority figure. It certainly had not been Hikari's looks or any other personal quality. More than any other girl Hikari had ever met, Asuka held extremely high standards for others, ones that matched the almost impossible standards she always seemed to set for herself. To Asuka, rank mattered. If people didn't measure up—like, say, Keiko Nagara—then they were not good enough.

Despite how snobbish and even arrogant that attitude might be, Hikari had never thought it was her place to judge her based solely on it. Because, like a frozen, unforgiving iceberg, there was a lot more to Asuka beneath the surface. She could seem shallow from a distance, but actually, when you got close you discovered she was a very complicated girl who was prone to odd contradictions and full of surprises. Their relationship, for example, should not have worked based solely on their different personalities, yet it did.

By now, through the trials and tribulations born out of their normal school lives and Asuka's duty as an Evangelion pilot, they had somehow gone beyond matters of status or standards.

Against all odds, they had developed what could only be described as true fondness between them, tolerance of each other's flaws and even understanding, however one-sided those things could be at times. Hikari would still call it a real friendship. She thought Asuka should hear that.

"You know, Asuka," Hikari gently placed a hand on the redhead's shoulder, "I am your friend, for better or worse. You are ... you are like one of my sisters. You are family, and family members are supposed to look after one another.

I understand if you feel embarrassed, but there's nothing to be embarrassed about. Trust me. I will always look up to you. And I'll always want to help you."

"I'm not your sister." Asuka shrugged her hand off.
"I don't have any family. I don't need a family."

"Do it for me then," Hikari said, trying to ignore the bitter note in her friend's voice. "I told you Kodama moved out, right? Not that long ago. So, I need someone to talk to, you know, about girl stuff. I need someone to tell me if my outfit matches my shoes. I need someone to tell me how I could do better than being just a boring class representative. Someone whose opinion I value."

"You mean you need someone to tell you what to do," Asuka said, her tone turning sarcastic.
"That's a big sister, and you have one already."

"Well, yeah, but she moved. And anyway, I think it's more like a best friend."

It was semantics, really. Asuka had always been far too egotistic to bother with such familial distinctions, but they did indicate a closer relationship which was just the point Hikari wanted to make. Rather than argue, however, the redhead lowered her head slightly.

"I'll just be a burden. I can't pilot my Eva, so ... that's all I am to anyone. Why would you care? Even Shinji didn't."

"Because I just do. And you have never been a burden, Asuka." Hikari waved off the objection despite her own doubts. She hated hearing someone like Asuka use such a dejected tone, and knew the reason for it must have been very painful. "I'd be honored to have you. Pen-Pen will be happy to see you, too. I can tell he misses you."

It was a syrupy thing to say, almost cliché in its simplicity, but it was sincere. Hikari shuffled around to the side, making sure the other girl could see her.

"Please?" she smiled. "For me?"

Asuka sighed and let a little hint of appreciation enter her features. She took a long time to think about what was really being offered. Hikari didn't try to pretend to sneak some sympathy below the redhead's radar, but she did hope to make her realize that it was okay to accept some comfort when she needed it.

*You know you don't want to be alone. Come on.
It's okay to need help every once in a while. Let me do that for you.*

Hikari reached again for her friend's shoulder to make her point. When Asuka didn't object this time, the pigtailed girl knew she had succeeded. "Let's go," she said. "Some of your things are probably already waiting for you."

She got a nod and a half-smile in return. Given what she had seen so far, Hikari was willing to accept that as a step in the right direction. Hopefully, the first of many.

Hikari waited for Asuka to gather her book bag, then the two of them walked outside and started making their way down the street towards their designated train station, moving through a much thinner crowd than the one Hikari had encountered earlier.

As they walked, Hikari was careful not to look terribly concerned, even though she could not help casting an occasional glance in Asuka's direction, quickly looking away when she thought the other girl might see her. The train entered the station almost as soon as they did.

They found a pair of seats, but when Asuka sat down Hikari excused herself and stepped back onto the aisle, turning aside. She fetched her cell phone and sent a brief text message to Major Katsuragi and another to Keiko, thanking her in writing this time for her helpfulness, adding that Asuka appreciated the gesture—a lie, but a well-meaning one. She did all of it quietly, hoping the noise of the train would mask the clicking of the keys from the proud and arrogant redhead who wouldn't take kindly to such subterfuge.

I should send one to Shinji, too, Hikari thought, with a sudden bitter feeling. *And scold him for what he did . . . only I still don't know what that was.* She decided against it. She would need to demand answers from him in person.

When the messages were sent, Hikari slipped the phone back into her pocket and finally took a seat to Asuka's right. "Just some last-minute class business," she explained. "You know how it is. Some students couldn't find their shoes if you don't remind them where they left them."

Asuka would have normally been rightly annoyed by such behavior. Now she just stared out the window in brooding, uncharacteristic, utterly miserable silence.

Hikari opened her book bag in search of something to distract her from the sudden awkwardness, but as she did she also realized that Asuka's silence bothered her almost as much as her tone earlier had. And she wondered again what Shinji Ikari could have possibly done to hurt her so badly.





Hyuga yawned loudly, stretching his arms like someone who'd just gotten out of bed. Then he turned to Misato. "Sorry, Ma'am." He shook his head and pushed his glasses back into place. "I didn't get any sleep last night."

"No need to be polite around me. You should know that by now." Misato dismissed him with a shrug of her shoulders and put her cell phone away into a pocket inside her jacket. Section 2 had already reported Asuka never arrived at school, but this time they knew where she was, and they had orders to convey her to Miss Horaki's by the end of the day anyway so there was no need to worry. But it seemed the ever-reliable Hikari had taken matters into her own hands. "Ritsuko insisted Unit-00 should be worked on overnight, didn't she?"

"Yeah, me and about every other tech she could find." He stifled another yawn. "She seems to have found another gear. I don't know how she does it. She'll be in charge of Unit-00's next test as well."

Maya will probably be relieved, Misato thought. She raised her head and looked around them.

Talking inside Central Dogma was not advisable—there was surveillance everywhere, and the risk of being overheard was a constant problem. But instead of meeting on the watermelon field like they had in the past, Misato had elected to drive them a good distance from NERV HQ to a small clearing south of the pyramid where the trees grew thickest. There they stood, leaning against the side of her car, their conversation as private as it could possibly be. The air was thick with the scent of the forest.

"Ritsuko is a workaholic," Misato said. "Always has been, even in school. I think she assumes everyone around her is as well."

If you ask me, I think that's an impossible expectation to set on people. Maya worked on that thing for months. She deserves a lot of credit."

The look on Hyuga's face made it clear he agreed. "Unit-00 isn't even combat capable. Most of its armor is missing. And it's going to stay missing because we don't have enough components. Regeneration is 80%. One arm is still entirely inadequate. And Doctor Akagi is already looking at clearing Rei for a second activation, despite the other doctors' orders."

Misato felt a surge of intense dislike for Ritsuko. It was by no means a new feeling. "That's just reckless. Even for her."

"It gets worse. I tried accessing Rei's recent medical history but it's sealed—military grade encryption. Obviously, there's something she doesn't want anyone to see. Why else would she do that?"

"I agree. It's pretty obvious she's keeping a secret." *Like, for example, Misato thought acidly, the fact that Rei is really a clone, one of a whole aquarium full, and that the Rei everyone has always known actually died and was replaced like a broken part in an automobile.*

God, that still made her stomach turn. And Ritsuko just had to get Shinji involved in that, too. Misato had seen enough to know the blonde woman was capable of hiding anything.

"Any idea about the rush?" she asked.

"Only guesswork. I know it has something to do with China. Well, it could be anything really, but our link with the Chinese branch has been on non-stop like we are waiting for something. I have no clue about what is going on over there. But some people are starting to get really mad."

Misato frowned, recalling information from some dusty corner of her mind. "The Chinese have an Eva unit, right?"

“Do you want the official or the unofficial answer?” Hyuga shifted his weight, turning so that he was leaning slightly on his side, facing her. His features were knotted with evident concern. He didn’t like any of this any more than she did.

“Yeah, I guess it all depends on who you ask these days. It’s just unbelievable.”

“That’s what worries me, actually. I shouldn’t be telling you this—you are an authority figure after all—but, well, I have a pen pal. Inside the Chinese Branch. We share messages regularly on a private forum. Let’s just say we are not the only ones burning the midnight oil.”

Given how much time he spent in front of a computer, Misato was not surprised to hear that he had contacts with the other branches. Hers only extended to the German branch, and mostly ended after Kaji and Asuka’s transfer. “Lots of counterfeit movies have come from that friendship, I trust.”

“And a lot more,” Hyuga admitted. “Quite a lot more.”

“If you start winking at me, I’m gonna get angry,” Misato said. “I get what you are trying to say. You don’t have to be so evasive about it. It’s me you’re talking to. Please. This isn’t a spy movie.”

“Ah, right. Sorry. I’m just not used to this kind of thing.”

I’m not either. This was Kaji’s game.

Misato was trying to be patient and to make her voice match her intentions, but the last two days had been so taxing she wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep it up. “Hyuga, tell me about your friend,” she said, then turned her head to lock her eyes on his. “Does he have information we can use?”

“Unfortunately, he’s located in Shanghai, not Beijing. A little out of the loop you might say. But he’s been awfully busy these last few days.” Hyuga looked over to the huge pyramidal building in the distance as he spoke. Misato wondered if he was intentionally being evasive. “From what I gather, the UN advisors are going crazy over there. Absolutely nuts. Some are even threatening sanctions unless inspections of certain facilities are allowed.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It does. And whatever is going on, the Chinese central government will only officially admit to conducting a routine experiment. Nothing too important, they say, but it looks like even people on the inside who would normally be able to send messages out from Beijing are being prevented from doing so. It’s sealed tight.”

“How does someone in Shanghai know this?” Misato wondered, but she answered her own question with the most obvious explanation. “Your contact has a contact, I assume?”

Hyuga nodded. “Yes. I might be reading too much into it, of course, but I don’t have to tell you what might happen if China gets to make Unit-A operational.”

“The balance is disrupted,” Misato said quietly. She could already see where this was headed, what it would lead to. The same place arm races usually did. “And I suppose the fact that it’s completely illegal doesn’t bother them at all?”

“Why would it? China was never supposed to keep an Evangelion in the first place, remember? They were to build one and turn it over to the UN, like Germany with Unit-02. And they did. Except that they also reverse-engineered a copy of their own and somehow have brought it close enough to activation. And there’s no way they did it alone.

Of course, India and Pakistan are horrified at the prospect of China having an unlicensed Eva. Russia seems indifferent, but you know the Russians. They probably already have one sitting under the Moscow metro or something. Wouldn't surprise me. But the really troubling part is the fact that China has been ignoring all proper channels of communication and the government still claims it's just for research purposes, even when other areas of that same government claim it doesn't exist."

"Research what?" Misato replied, folding her arms across her chest. "Why? They have to know we know they're lying. And the UN. No one is that stupid."

Hyuga threw up his shoulders into another shrug. "God only knows. I'd imagine the UN fears that China is doing weapons testing with the Eva. That could create a nightmare scenario: India, Pakistan and Russia are all secret nuclear powers. If they think China is planning something against them, they'll hit the panic button."

"And everyone goes boom, from weapons they're not even supposed to have. Gotta love the modern age. Fucking brilliant. And there's not a damn thing anyone can do." Even Misato was surprised by the sudden bitterness in her voice. Hyuga noticed as well.

"Major, is there something wrong?" he asked, and for the first time appeared confused. "I mean, something else wrong."

She shook her head slowly. "Nothing."

Hyuga made a face. He didn't believe her. "Major ... you know, we don't always have to talk about stuff like this. I wouldn't mind if you wanted to, well, if you needed someone to vent. Maybe it's not my place to say that, but still, you should know. I'm here for you."

“It’s not that you haven’t earned my trust, Hyuga,” Misato said, carefully treading waters she was not very comfortable in. She was aware that saying the wrong thing might give him the wrong impression. She didn’t want to push him away, but also didn’t want to draw him closer. “You have my trust. You are probably the only one I CAN trust. It’s just difficult talking about personal feelings with anyone. Particularly feelings that are . . . less than pleasant.”

“Is it something to do with the children?”

Yeah, I’m that predictable, Misato thought sourly.

There were really only a few things that got to her the same way that her two teen wards did. Ritsuko had once accused her of wanting to play surrogate mother because it would help her life feel less empty. Misato had to agree there was an element of truth there, but she didn’t see how caring for other people could possibly be a bad thing. She still didn’t think it was, whatever her present feelings.

Shinji and Asuka represented part of a life she couldn’t have otherwise, a life which she didn’t even know she wanted until she’d taken them under her wing. But they weren’t family, and her feelings were little more than stand-ins to fill in the void. To make her feel better. Unlike a real mother whose duty it was to keep her family together, all Misato could do to help was break it apart to keep them from hurting each other.

“Did Ritsuko tell you?” Misato asked, still sounding slightly bitter despite being guiltily aware that Hyuga didn’t deserve it. “Or did you come up with that assumption all on your own just now?”

Hyuga drew himself back, both hands raised towards her in apology. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly, just like Misato imagined Shinji would. “I didn’t mean to intrude. I thought . . . maybe it would help.”

He sounds just like Shinji, too, Misato thought. She remembered how she had seen the brown-haired Third Child earlier that morning, and what she had told him before about opening up to people. Maybe she should take her own advice for once. Shinji was never as alone as he thought—he had Rei Ayanami and his friends, and even herself. And so Misato had Hyuga.

She turned around, leaning tiredly forward and folding her arms on top of the car. She didn't take her eyes away from Hyuga.

"Yeah, it's the children," Misato said finally. "I guess it's not surprising at this point, but they had a fight. A bad one."

"But you've said they are always fighting, is that so?"

"No, this is different," Misato replied.

"I had to send Asuka to stay with a friend. I had no other choice."

"I'm sure you did what was best," Hyuga said, his voice going soft. It was a line Misato had already heard quite a few times before, and one she was all but growing immune to.

"Dealing with children is always complicated."

"It shouldn't be," Misato murmured in return. There was something heavy in her chest. "They are children, for Heaven's sake. You should be able to just ... protect them. Care for them. But when it's like this ... it becomes so difficult." She frowned at Hyuga. "I don't even know what they said to each other. I'm not sure I even want to know. When Shinji told me what happened he was reluctant to give many details. He said they fought but wouldn't tell me anything more. But I know it was bad. I can't blame him, can I? He goes out of his way to avoid confrontation."

"That he does." Hyuga was sympathetic, and of course he would be. Misato knew he liked Shinji well enough.

"He is rather easy to get along with."

“But Asuka, she’s . . .” Misato trailed off. Finding words to describe the redhead without speaking ill of her was very hard all of a sudden. “When Asuka wants to hurt she knows exactly what to say. And she won’t even look at me—that’s nothing new, really—but I can tell how hurt she is sometimes just by being near her.” She heaved a deep, heavy sigh, and felt her emotional strength evaporate. “This morning before she left, I found her sitting in the kitchen. She was wiping tears out of her eyes.”

“Crying?” Hyuga was incredulous. “Our Asuka?”

“Our Asuka.” Misato couldn’t believe it either. “She yelled when I asked what was wrong. You know her, she has to be strong. She can’t possibly let anyone near her. And even though I knew she had hurt Shinji just as much, I wanted so badly to just . . . tell her it’s okay to cry, and just hold her. But I couldn’t . . .”

As the words spilled out of her, so did the emotions. Seeing Asuka like that, remembering how dejected Shinji had been that morning, knowing how much they both meant to her—it was all suddenly more than Misato could bear. Before she knew it, the hardened facade she strove to present as NERV’s Chief of Operations had fallen away and left only the woman who had never really grown up, the would-be mother who couldn’t take care of herself let alone two young teenagers who hated each other.

She buried her face on her folded arms, fighting to keep the tears at bay. A fight she was losing. “I can’t do anything for Asuka. I can’t do anything for Shinji. I never could. I just ask things from them—ask them to risk their lives, ask them to suffer—but I can’t do anything to repay their sacrifice. They deserve better. They deserve better than me.”

Hyuga stood by silently until she finished, and she was convinced he would be disgusted to have his superior officer break down

in such an unsightly fashion. His silence was proof that he didn't approve, surely.

But then he moved closer, placing an arm on top of the car next to her. "Says who, Major?" he told her kindly. "Who could want anything more than someone who cares for them?"

Misato opened her eyes, lifting her head. The world had become blurry as seen through the distortion of her tears. She wiped them away on a red sleeve. "It isn't that simple. Caring for them is easy. It comes naturally. But I should do more than that. I should be able to help them."

Hyuga let the words hang in the air, perhaps hoping she would answer her own question. When it became clear that she couldn't, he moved even closer. So close, in fact, that the next time he spoke, she could feel his breath against her ear.

"Major, I wouldn't ever presume I know what to do in dealing with the children, or if I did, I would not presume to tell you how to feel about it. But don't you think that, maybe, you being there for them already is a lot of help? You can't force anyone to accept help if they don't want it, but they know it's there if they need it."

Misato could tell he really meant it, too. It wasn't the sort of artificial kindness people were so used to giving one another without any genuine feeling behind it. Strangely, it made her feel at once comforted and saddened: the former because she was assured of his sincerity, the latter because whatever she might think of him, he would never replace Kaji in her heart. And she knew, and had known for a long time, that Hyuga wanted to.

This was yet another reason why she had spent the last few months focusing on work and, above all, in preserving Kaji's quest for truth. It was much easier dealing with long-buried secrets than personal ones.

Especially ones that will only lead to more pain if you even acknowledge them.

“I don’t know.” Misato forced herself to regain her composure. “Could we not do this right now, Hyuga? Talking about the Children, I mean.”

He looked like he wanted to argue—again, his concern for her was painfully obvious—and maybe he thought talking about this really was the best thing to do. But Misato was still his boss and perfectly capable of deciding what to share. He had to respect that. “Sure, Major,” the operator finally said. “Anything you wish.”

Misato gave him a nod of gratitude.

“So, um, would you like me to find out more about what the Chinese Branch is up to?” Hyuga offered. “I can probably get into—”

“No,” Misato cut him off. She couldn’t have cared less at that point. Why should she? For three months, she’d chased ghosts while ignoring those who really mattered; those she should have helped. That was time she would never get back. And now this? She needed to get her priorities straight. “Whatever they are up to doesn’t concern us. They have obviously chosen to play around with something they don’t understand. It’s their funeral.” She pushed away from the car, then reached down for the door handle. “Let’s go back before we are missed.” She swung open the door.

Hyuga was already walking around to the other side. “Or discovered,” he said as he opened the passenger door, and glanced across the roof at Misato. “Snitches get stitches, I haven’t forgotten.”

Neither have I, Misato thought. She dropped into the driver’s seat and slammed the key into the ignition.
I keep a reminder on my answering machine.





“R-Rei?” Shinji hesitated as he caught sight of Rei Ayanami sitting on a wheelchair in the middle of the hallway that led from the main atrium to the rows of hospital rooms, wearing only a white gown and a tired expression. She was not alone.

Doctor Ritsuko Akagi, hands in her pockets, was leaning over the blue-haired girl, seemingly talking down to her. Shinji liked neither the woman’s looming presence nor her demeanor. He wanted to see Rei in private and had not considered there might be someone else with her.

Belatedly, he realized that was kind of stupid since this was still, last time he checked, a hospital. He had even brought flowers from the visitor’s center, a fact he now found himself feeling very embarrassed about. He didn’t even know why he’d done that—it just occurred to him they might somehow help Rei feel better.

When Ritsuko saw him, she straightened up. “We are busy. Visits are not allowed at the moment.” Her voice was cold, her expression clinical as she looked him over. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

Rei remained silent beside her like she hadn’t noticed him at all. Her eyes were dull, slightly unfocused. Shinji hoped she wasn’t medicated.

“Y-Yeah. No, I mean. Sorry,” he managed to say. “Misato gave me permission to miss school, and it’s too late anyway. School’s over.”

“Then why are you here, and not home?” Ritsuko demanded.

“Um, I . . . I wanted to see how Rei was doing a-and . . .” Shinji stammered, his cheeks warming up to a deep crimson blush.

"I . . . hope that's not too much trouble. I didn't think anyone would be here."

"And you brought her flowers, how charming." Ritsuko actually sounded slightly amused. A grin tugged on her lips. She then turned to Rei. Shinji noticed the much smaller girl had bowed her head and was now looking at the floor. "Don't you think so, Rei?"

"Yes," Rei answered obediently.

Being passive was part of Rei's nature, but her manner seemed different somehow. Not merely passive as much as it was completely submissive. Blue hair disheveled, red eyes downcast, the First Child looked like someone who'd just been found in an orphan shelter. Someone without power, without desire, without anything to call her own—even the hospital gown fit her poorly as if the act of clothing her had been an afterthought.

"That's a good girl." Ritsuko patted Rei on her head, a gesture that coming from anyone else might have been affectionate. But coming from Ritsuko Akagi it carried all the detached satisfaction of petting an obedient dog after performing a successful trick. Shinji didn't like it.

Why does she have to treat Rei like that? he thought.
Does she think she won't care or something?

Rei, for her part, did not lift her head or look at the woman. Her face remained neutral, and, as with so much else, if she was bothered at being condescended upon like this she didn't show it.

Shinji swallowed a flint of anger. He wanted to say something, but the words eluded him.

Then Ritsuko fixed his problem for him.
"I suppose you want to see her alone, right?"

She turned again to Shinji and began walking towards him, both hands back in her pockets. "I know you've been having a tough time, so I'll allow it for the sake of morale. Just don't take too long. Rei, don't forget what I told you."

She said this last part as she moved past the Third Child, without so much as looking back at Rei when she spoke to her. Shinji half expected her to whistle and for Rei to follow at her heels, wheelchair and all.

He waited for Ritsuko to disappear around the corner before cautiously approaching the blue-haired girl. Thankfully, he didn't have to worry about being able to look her in the eyes as hers were still firmly focused on the tiled floor.

"Um ... Rei. These are for you." He offered her the flowers, red roses because it was apparently the only kind easily available in Tokyo-3. "I'm glad you're okay."

Rei lifted her gaze, but a questioning expression came over her soft features—barely an expression, really. It was more like a sense. Shinji knew her well enough to understand, however.

"Flowers?" Rei's voice was weak, slightly confused.

"I-I just thought that ... Well, the hospital can be very depressing so ..." Shinji began hesitantly, again struggling to get the right words, "I thought these might cheer you up."

"Cheer me up?" Rei repeated, now with a clear hint of puzzlement. "A plant would not have such an effect."

No one had ever given her flowers before, Shinji was certain of that, and it said a lot about the spartan sort of life she'd led thus far. A short life, he reminded himself.

This Rei was, at most, a few months old. Even if she looked exactly like the other girl Shinji had known and cared about, she wasn't. That Rei was dead.

Still seeming confused, Rei took the flowers, not saying a word as she did, then raised them to her face to examine them more closely. She sniffed them. Her eyes widened.

"They are red," Shinji said. Then he felt stupid for pointing out something as obvious as the color of red roses. Anyone other than Rei Ayanami would have been annoyed.

"I ... they reminded me of you. They match your eyes."

"I do not like red."

If Shinji had felt stupid before, he was now sure he must have been the dumbest boy who ever walked the planet. How was he supposed to know that? Rei never talked about anything, much less what she liked and didn't like. Girls liked flowers. He just assumed ...

Like you assumed things about Asuka, a guilty voice suddenly rang inside his head. Like you assumed things about Misato. Always assuming and always being wrong.

"I ... s-sorry, I ... didn't know."

"But I think I like flowers." Rei was looking down at the flowers with a careworn expression. "Thank you. What do I do with them?"

"Well, you put them in water or they'll die," he said. "Haven't you ever put flowers in your apartment?"

"No."

That's a shame, Shinji thought.

Now came the hard part; the real reason he forced himself out of bed and down into Central Dogma. He wished he could have avoided it—or at least, he wished that he'd found another, better, less selfish reason for coming. But the memory of what he'd told Asuka was too painful, too overwhelming. Keeping it to himself was more than he could endure.

“Uh . . . Rei?”

“Yes?”

“Could I . . . talk to you about something? Something important. I didn't even know if I should come, but you've always listened, and I'm comfortable talking with you.” He looked nervously down the hallway. “So please, will you talk to me?”

Rei didn't answer right away. It made Shinji wonder if she even wanted him there, although that wasn't something Rei would ever say. She was staring intently at the roses, their fresh petals as crimson as her eyes, an inch from her nose. And she still said nothing. Shinji felt his throat go dry. The silence ate away at his resolve, and after a moment all he could think of doing was running away.

“I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to impose on you like this. I'll leave you alone.”

As he turned to leave, Rei grabbed him by the wrist. “Ikari . . . Shinji, you can come in if you want,” she said, looking up at him for the first time. “My room is the second door on the left.”

Shinji had spent enough time in NERV's medical ward that he already knew much of the layout. It was, like most hospitals, a somewhat depressing place despite its inherently benign function.

The nurses knew him on sight, which said a lot in itself, while the bright lights and polished tile floors belied the pain that these very walls were built to treat.

He wheeled Rei down the hallway, following her directions until they reached a room with the name Ayanami R. written on a chart hanging by the door. The room looked sparse even to Shinji, almost entirely bare except for the bed and a few small pieces of furniture. Compared with the much larger room Asuka had been kept in during her coma, Rei's was a box, smaller and closer to what might have been deemed ordinary, holding none of the complex life support equipment.

Of course, he made a point of recalling, Asuka had required far more constant attention in her condition than Rei now did. She had been completely dependent on those around her. Helpless.

Shinji felt a new pang of guilt. He hadn't thought about that for the longest time—about what he had nearly done when the unconscious redhead had laid sprawled, half naked in front of him. He hoped the nurse on duty that day, who certainly must have found Asuka on the bed after he left, had never told her. But it wasn't because he feared her anger. Asuka simply didn't deserve the humiliation such an episode would cause her.

Rei Ayanami, ironically, probably wouldn't have cared.

Closing the door behind them, Shinji pushed the wheelchair-bound girl to the foot of her bed. He carefully placed her left arm around his shoulders to help her up and onto the bed. She was surprisingly light, her skin cold against his through her gown.

"Would you like me to put those in water?" Shinji asked her, gesturing towards the flowers she still cradled on her lap.

He then moved an arm under Rei's legs and helped her swing them onto the bed.

"I do not have anything to put water in," Rei replied.

"I can just hold them."

"They will die like that." Shinji looked around and spotted a serving tray by her bedside along with the remnants of Rei's dinner. Atop the tray was a used set of cheap-looking plastic cutlery and a drinking cup. "That will do, I think." He pointed to the cup.

"As you wish."

Shinji picked up the plastic cup, walked over to the small bathroom and gave it a rinse under the sink faucet. When it was clean, he filled it with water and returned to Rei's side, holding out the cup for her to put the flowers in it. She did, and he placed them down on her nightstand. Then he found a chair nearby and pulled it close.

"So, uh, Rei ... I need to talk to you," Shinji said as he sat there, uncertain about what to do with himself. "If you don't mind."

"Yes. You already asked. Please go ahead," Rei said, but she didn't turn to face him. She was staring at the roses in a strangely disconnected manner.

Shinji knew she was listening. He struggled to find the words that would properly and coherently explain all the things he was feeling; the pain and hurt of what had happened. *Just tell her the truth. Tell her what happened. She'll understand.*

"I ... I had a fight ... with Asuka," he began, focusing on Rei's calm form. He felt exposed, almost like being naked.

His insides were raw, his chest growing tight with remorse as the memories returned. It hurt. It had never stopped hurting.

“And I said things that I shouldn’t have ... and she ... cried.”

Rei said nothing, but her red eyes shifted slightly.

“I ... I feel horrible. It’s not like when we fought before. It’s not like when she calls me stupid. Now it’s ... painful. She shouldn’t have said the things she said about you—there’s no excuse for saying that even if it’s someone you don’t like. I ... said them right back at her. I told her I hated her. I told her ...” a whimper escaped his lips. “I told her I wanted her to die. And she cried. I made her cry.”

Rei still said nothing, and even though Shinji knew it wasn’t real he thought he saw in her otherwise neutral eyes a reflection of his own guilt. And for a fleeting second, the red became sapphire blue in his mind’s eye and he saw Asuka staring back at him, tears streaming down her pretty face.

I hate you too! If anyone should die, it’s YOU!

That image—that *memory*—made something very cold and very sharp stir in Shinji’s chest. At that very moment, when the words left his mouth, Shinji knew he had wounded Asuka more severely than any Angel ever had.

He already knew his redheaded roommate had suffered a lot in her life, having fallen from grace as a child prodigy with the world at her feet to a devastated and bitter teenager. But despite her anger, her haughtiness, and everything else that might have influenced her to become the girl she was, Shinji had never seen that look before.

And he never wanted to see it again. Because that look, that one single moment of frozen sorrow, encapsulated all that was wrong

in their relationship. All the hurt they had caused one another. The hatred. Even though he'd never wanted to hurt or hate her. He just wanted to get along. He wanted to help her and see her smile. How could that be so much to ask?

"I hate you!" Asuka had screamed at him after he slapped her, and when he said it back, she tried to strangle him. He could still feel her hands around his throat. He gasped. The sudden flow of emotions overwhelmed him.

I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

"I shouldn't have ..." Shinji barely managed, before the tears began rolling down his cheeks, "But she ... she can be so mean. She had no right to say those things ... but I had no right to say them to her either." He leaned forward, burying his face in his hands, weeping. "I had no right ... please, forgive me."

"I will not," Rei said. "I can not."

Whatever Shinji had expected in return, that certainly wasn't it. He looked up, eyes red and stinging. "Uh?"

Rei was staring at him now, her gaze easy and non-judgmental. "You can ask me for forgiveness, but I have no reason to forgive you. You have done nothing to me that would require it. If you feel it is the Second who should forgive you, then you should go to her and ask her to do so instead."

"I can't." He shook his head, sniffing and wiping away tears with his hands. "I can't go to her. She hates me. She—"

"She is who she is," Rei replied. For the first time, her voice was firm. "And she does not have to forgive you. It is not an obligation. She may if she wishes, and you may forgive her, too."

“But ... what’s the point in apologizing to someone if they will just hate you for it?”

“Will it make you feel better?”

After that Shinji fell silent, uncertain about the answer and its implication. It would make him feel better, but that was just his selfishness. It wouldn’t help Asuka, and it wouldn’t make her feel better. And so he would only fuel her hatred of him, gaining nothing else.

“People make themselves what they want to be, not what others wish them to be,” Rei said. “I can only be me, and no one else. You accepted me for being me. Isn’t that right? Even though I was not the person you remembered or wanted. So you should accept her for being her.”

Shinji didn’t understand how that could help. He’d tried to accept Asuka, before finally resigning himself to letting her be alone because he was sure that was what she wanted from him. And even though he disliked her attitude and her angry, abrasive personality as a whole, he knew those were qualities that made the Second Child the girl she was. He’d tried to accept them as well. All she had to do was be a little nicer to him, a little more thoughtful, and he would have gladly repaid her kindness several times over.

But Asuka would do none of those things. Because she hated him. And after what he’d said, maybe she did indeed have a right to. He couldn’t imagine she’d feel any other way. Her forgiveness seemed like an impossible dream.

The silence lasted several minutes. Shinji used them to try to compose himself, wiping his face with the hem of his shirt. His eyes still stung, but the tears had stopped.

“Is that all?” Rei finally said.

“I ... y-yes, I guess it is.”

“Then I think you should go.” Rei lay back on her pillow, folded her hands in her lap, and stared at the ceiling, not caring to cover herself with the thin bed sheets.

Shinji swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. “Rei? Are you ... angry with me?” he couldn’t help the question. In his present state, he didn’t think he could take someone else rejecting him. It was too much. It was all too much. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No. Why should I be angry?” Rei answered. She turned her head and frowned at him. “I feel our discussion has reached its only possible outcome. While I enjoy your company, Doctor Akagi ordered me to rest for the next activation test tomorrow. Therefore, I must rest. I cannot do that with you here.”

“Another activation?” Shinji stared at her in disbelief. “Tomorrow?”

“Yes. I was informed that it has become a top priority for me to pilot Unit-00. All other projects have been suspended. I must make it work.”

“Isn’t that too soon? Rei, you can’t!”

Rei actually sighed. “Please understand. I do not wish to argue.” She looked at him with eyes that seemed to beg. “Let me rest. I will be okay. Thank you for your concern.”

Shinji wasn’t stupid, no matter what Asuka liked to say. He’d never believed the tests would be stopped for something as seemingly unimportant as Rei getting hurt. Too much time and money had already been spent.

But what purpose could they achieve by putting Rei back inside Unit-00 when she was still bedridden?

NERV—and his father—couldn't possibly believe Rei was disposable any longer, could they? They knew the truth. She was the last one. Shinji had been there with Ritsuko and Misato when the other copies, or whatever they were, had been destroyed. And even if they considered THIS Rei as another copy, she was still also a teenager, a child, someone like him, someone like Asuka. Her life had value. At least, it had value to him.

Apparently, that wasn't the case for anyone else. Certainly not for Ritsuko Akagi, who treated Rei like a pet, or to Asuka, who verbally abused her, or even Misato, who mostly ignored her. And his father ... he was the worst of all. But as those thoughts entered his mind and filled his heart with outrage, Shinji realized any protest he made would be futile, like his protests over Rei's first activation.

No one cares anymore. To NERV, she's not a person. She's just a tool. Something to be used until broken.

Feeling utterly helpless, the Third Child sank into the chair, shoulders slumped, head down. "Rei, what should I—"

"You already know," Rei said before he could finish the question, rolling her head on her pillow. She glanced at the flowers again, sprouting from their plastic cup. Shinji couldn't help noticing how very bright, lively, and red they appeared. A spot of life in the room's grey dullness. "The more I look at them, the more beautiful they seem. But even they have thorns. You can cut yourself if you are not careful. That does not change what it is."

Somehow, Shinji had the strange impression she wasn't really talking about the flowers, but he was too tired and didn't dare ask.





Still wearing her pink cotton pajamas—the ones with the small printed cartoon bears—Hikari Horaki found herself sitting in the living room, staring at the TV screen, with the quiet house feeling strangely empty around her. Adding to the strangeness was the fact that today was a school day. Hikari could not remember the last time she had missed school when it wasn't related to a medical reason or an Angel attack.

The day had started normally enough. Hikari woke up early as usual, before sunrise, and made breakfast for her little sister like she always did but between seeing Nozomi off to school and waiting for Asuka to get out of bed before leaving, she had finished the morning parked in front of the TV. Asuka had never appeared, and she just couldn't leave without at least seeing that her friend had something to eat.

So Hikari waited. And waited. And waited.

Picking up the remote control, she clicked the menu button and read the time. Ten minutes before noon. Forget about making breakfast for Asuka, she'd need to prepare lunch soon. If only her friend would come down.

I shouldn't blame her for oversleeping, Hikari thought. She probably still feels really bad about what happened. But she shouldn't stay in bed all day either. It's bad enough that she's missing school again.

A few minutes later, Hikari checked the time again on the TV. She sighed. It was officially noon now. Half the day was wasted. And still no Asuka.

Hikari laid down the remote control on the couch next to her and got up. She slipped her feet into her pink slippers then headed up

the stairs. With her big sister Kodama off in Kyoto, she'd been more than happy to let Asuka use her large bedroom. She was sure her sister wouldn't mind since it was for a good cause. Asuka had turned in sometime around 8:00 PM last night after Hikari made her some supper, closed the door behind her, and did not come out again.

Kodama's old room, presently Asuka's, was the last one to the left, occupying a whole corner of the second floor. Hikari knocked on the door. There was no response.

"Asuka, time to get up. It's late."

Like most of the other bedroom doors in the house, this one had no lock. Knocking to let Asuka know she was coming in was just courtesy.

"I'm coming in." With that, Hikari slid the door open, stepped inside, then softly closed the door. "Asuka, you up?"

The room was mostly as her sister left it. She couldn't take many of her belongings with her to Kyoto, city apartments being the miniatures they were. The thing that had always struck Hikari about her sister's room was the cleanliness, even by her own standards; every little thing had its place, and everything seemed to match every other thing. Asuka, however, was clearly working on changing that. She'd thrown her half-opened backpack hastily at the foot of a dresser and left her two untouched suitcases propped up against the wall. A white and blue school uniform was draped over the back of a chair, together with socks, shoes, and her red hair clips.

Kodama would be outraged, Hikari thought with some amusement. She took a knee and picked up the backpack, setting it carefully in the chair. It contained mostly underwear, some clothing and toiletries. Then she retrieved the uniform and hung it in the closet.

Asuka's Section 2 bodyguards had brought over the suitcases, but the redhead hadn't gone near them yet.

Finally, Hikari turned her attention to the bed.

Asuka lay curled up under a quilted blanket, her slender form covered but unmistakable, her pale feet and a sheet of flaring locks from her golden-red mane visible at either end. She made a kind of bulge, although not a very large one. Pen-Pen was lying on the floor next to the bed, his small beady eyes closed.

The lazy penguin might have been sleeping.

The girl he was keeping company was most certainly not.

Even as she stood over her, Hikari could hear the animated rhythm of the music she was listening to blaring through her earbuds, the volume turned up as high as it would go.

Hikari sighed again and sat on the bed beside Asuka, careful not to step on the dozing penguin. She reached underneath the blanket, found the little digital music player and switched it off with a thumb. Asuka did not stir. Hikari turned her head away, keeping her eyes focused on Pen-Pen rather than on the covered girl. With the curtains drawn, very little light filtered into the room.

"I know you can hear me, Asuka. Time to get up. It's really late."

"I don't care." The response which came back was a throaty croak, and did nothing to ease Hikari's growing worry.

"The sun's out. It's really nice."

"I don't care."

"Well, I do, Asuka, and you can't stay in bed all day," Hikari said a little more firmly. "We're already missing school today so why don't we go outside? The shops are all open. I'm sure you'd love to go."

"You go. I don't care."

“After what I said, how could I go anywhere? I wanted to make you breakfast, but you didn’t come down. Now we might as well call the school and report we aren’t going. They won’t be happy.”

“If you want to be mad at me, go ahead. Yell at me. Tell me you hate me. I don’t care. I don’t care about school. I don’t care about anything.”

Hikari wished she wouldn’t say such things. She wished she wouldn’t even think them. For all her haughtiness, the redhead absolutely had a self-destructive streak, and if given a chance, she’d withdraw and wither away in her own lonely despair. Hikari had already learned that from her own experience with her. Last time, she had missed the signs until it was too late. Asuka ran away, and ... hurt herself.

Keep her talking, Hikari thought. Asuka likes to talk so let her know you are here for her. Ask her some questions, maybe.

A subject quickly came to mind, one the Class Rep. had always been curious about.

“You know, since we aren’t going anywhere, we can just talk, right? How about I ask you something and you ask me something in return?”

“Go away,” Asuka said. Hikari ignored her.

“I always wanted to know, what was it like when you came here? When you came to Japan, I mean. Is it what you thought it’d be like? Is it very different from Germany? Did you have many friends there?”

“Friends?” Asuka made a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob. “I didn’t have any friends. I was the youngest girl in every class I ever took. The boys would look at me, but not one of them ever approached me. I was taboo for them.”

“Um, that was in college, right?”

“It was a joke! Just a big stupid joke!”

Bragging about finishing college early was among the first things Asuka had ever done when they met, but she had never elaborated on it much. Now, after hearing that answer, Hikari realized why.

“It can’t have been that bad. How can it be bad? It’s college.” Hikari said. Looking down, she noticed Pen-Pen had jerked his eyes open, woken by all the noise his humans were making, no doubt. Hikari removed one of her slippers and stroked him gently with a foot, his rubbery feathers cool to the touch. Meanwhile, Asuka—

“I hated it,” Asuka said bluntly, shifting herself into a tighter ball under the blanket. This time, however, she kept talking. It didn’t help. If anything it made things worse. “I hated every day I was there. My teachers . . . I know they despised me. I was smarter than they were. I had all the answers. I made them look bad. I could see it in their eyes when they looked at me. I told my father, but he didn’t care. When I was little, my stepmother only ever tolerated me so she could be close to my father. College was their chance to get rid of me.”

Hikari had not expected that. She was horrified. *Has her whole life been like this?* She wondered sadly. *Doesn’t she have ANY happy memories?*

“Come on, Asuka.” Hikari found herself fighting the urge to reach out and embrace her. And she would have, but she wasn’t really sure how Asuka might take it. With the redhead being like she was, such an open display of sympathy could make her even more upset. “I’m sure your parents were proud. I mean, look at what you’ve done. You graduated college. You are an Eva pilot who protects millions of people. You are a hero.

You shouldn't really go around feeling everyone hates you just because you think a few don't like you."

"What's the difference? Everyone can hate me if they want, the people I meet most of all. I'm used to it. I deserve it."

Hikari shook her head. "No, Asuka, don't—"

"You weren't there. You never saw. How can you understand? That day ... that day I got in the Eva and the Angel showed me what I was like. It made me realize ... that I deserved it. But I can't stop being me."

"Nobody deserves to be hurt like that, Asuka. No one deserves to be hated."

Oddly enough, Hikari thought of Toji, and all the pain and hurt that had brought along. But despite that, the times she went to see him during weekends were the happiest she could remember. So even that kind of pain did not exist in a vacuum, and it could eventually lead to happiness.

Hikari had managed that strictly on her own, through no fault of Asuka's or her sisters. And she was sure that with some help the haughty redhead could do the same. She refused to believe anyone's life could be truly broken beyond repair.

"It's stupid, really." Despite the blanket, Asuka's body seemed to shiver. "The Angel showed me ... I should've known when I kissed him. I knew what I wanted, and that he wouldn't give it to me. But I didn't know why. I pretended like I didn't care—it was such a stupid thing to cry over." Her voice was breaking. "I can't pretend anymore, Hikari. I don't want to."

“So don’t,” Hikari said, watching as Pen-Pen pushed himself up, his barrel-shaped body wobbling. “The first step in being honest with others is being honest with yourself. Sounds to me like you’ve already managed that.”

“No.” Asuka shook her head on her pillow. “It’s too late. Unit-02 doesn’t work. I can’t even get myself ki—”

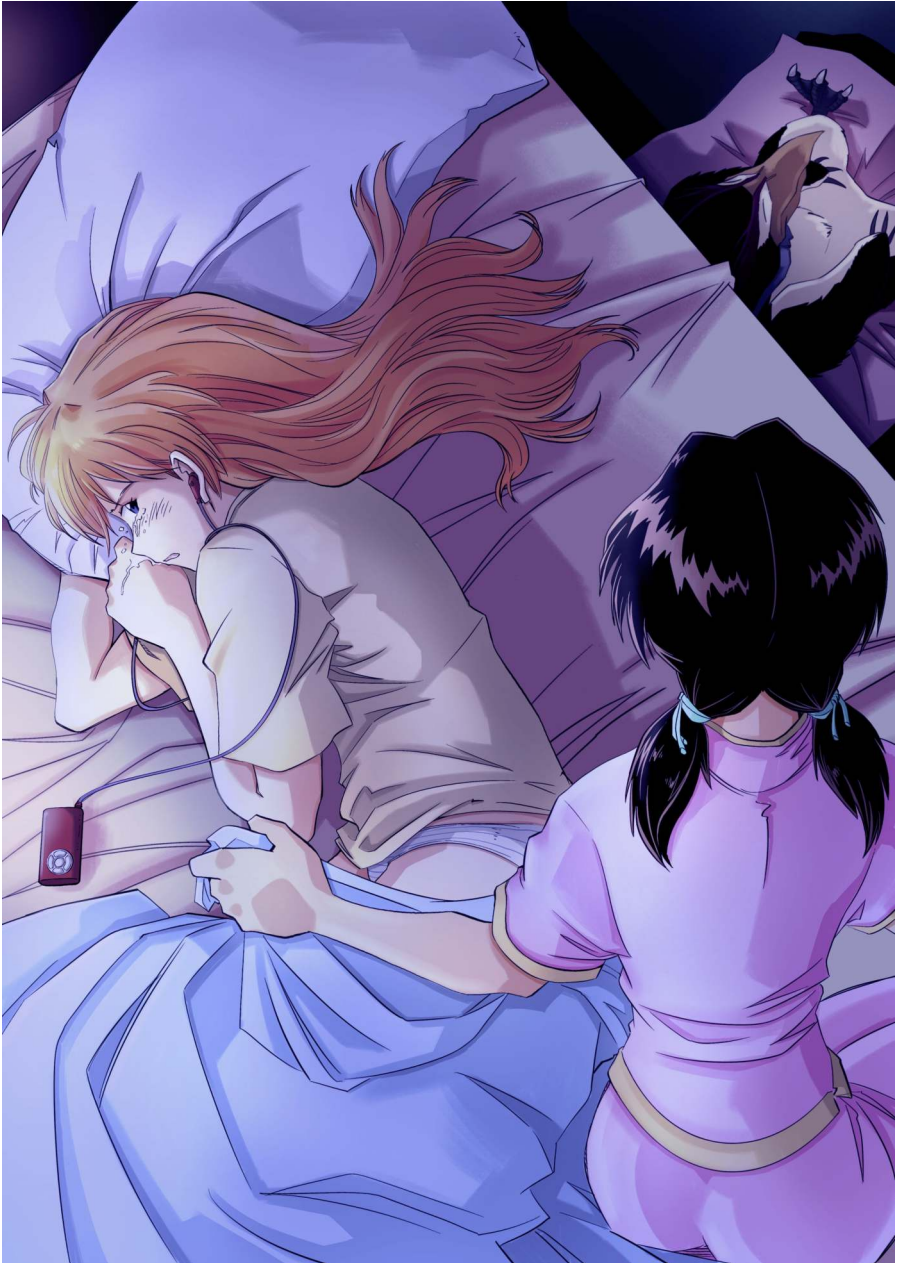
Hikari snapped before she could utter the last awful word. “You are wrong! You were wrong before, and are STILL wrong! No one deserves to be hurt like this, not even if you think you do. So don’t tell me you don’t care, because that’s not an excuse. I care. I care a lot. That’s enough for me, and I am NOT going to sit by and let you do this to yourself again. Now come on, you can’t stay like this all day. I’ll make you lunch.”

Reaching down, she took the edge of Asuka’s blanket and pulled it back just enough to show her face. What she saw made her heart feel hollow: blue eyes swollen and bloodshot and utterly hopeless as they looked up and met her brown ones, cheeks covered in wet streaks and long strands of her hair. It was as if someone had taken Asuka’s pretty features and washed them in grief.

“Asuka, how long have you been—” Hikari tried to keep her composure. She tried and failed, and then looked away. *Hours*, she realized. *She’s been crying for hours. No. Longer than that. It’s like she’s been crying a whole lifetime.*

“Go away!” Asuka snatched the blanket from her hand and tossed it over her head again. “Leave me alone! Just leave me alone!” And then she began to sob.

But Hikari wasn’t going anywhere. Even if Asuka yelled at her and begged her, even when the sound of weeping nearly brought her to tears. She sat there and waited, and stopped caring about school. It was simply not important anymore.





Time meant very little for Rei Ayanami. Other people lived their entire lives by it, and so Rei was forced to accept it existed because it proved convenient in her personal relations to have a point of reference for when a certain task should be done. But time itself had no value to her.

Schedules, on the other hand, were far more important. Her life was measured by schedules—when she should eat, sleep, go to school, pilot Unit-00, everything. And always, without exception, imposed on her by someone else. It was a simple arrangement. All she had to do was follow her schedule. All she had to do was obey.

She had been doing that as long as she could remember, and, more tellingly, had been doing it without thinking. Only recently had she begun to understand what it meant. She obeyed his will because she was his doll. He created her. He was her master. She would die if he asked her to.

The Second had said so, and despite the girl's harsh manner, Rei had enough self-awareness to realize that she was right. Rei knew what not being liked was like from her experiences with Doctor Akagi, and there was no doubt the Second Child disliked her. But that did not reduce the truth of her words. And although the truth bothered her, she also realized there was very little she could do to change it. If anything, Rei envied the Second in this regard. She had determination, agency, and the very human desire to make herself into more.

Rei had none of those things.

As she pressed the button on her plugsuit's wrist, she could not get that last thought out of her mind. She would die—she did die.

But not for him. Slowly, the images of her death drifted from the corners of her memory. She saw them as if it had been herself who died, even though she had not even been born.

Ayanami had died, not Rei. Not her.

*She was free of him in the end, Rei thought.
She made her own fate even if she thought of him when she died.*

The plugsuit's mechanism hissed as it vented the air out and tightened around her body with an iron grip. Rei winced, the touch feeling like a hundred hands clamping down on her, a reminder that while she may have been scheduled for a second activation test, she still wasn't physically recovered from the first. But that didn't matter. Only the schedule did.

Rei couldn't know how many hours had passed. Most of her time was spent sleeping or medicated to help ease the aching tenderness in her whole body. She hurt—her muscles, her chest, her joints, her head. Despite the additional rest, however, she was still weak and slightly disoriented, and felt a hint of the squirming emotion that she'd come to define as apprehension. Normally, she'd be able to simply put it out of her mind. She wasn't supposed to feel frightened. She wasn't supposed to feel anything. But the doubts lingered.

*It hurt the first time, Rei told herself.
It's going to hurt again. Why not just refuse?*

*Because you are his doll, a sharp, shrill voice answered.
You would die if he told you to.*

Yes, she would. Rei saw no point denying what she knew to be the truth. Anything else would imply an ability to make a choice she didn't possess. It would require free will. It would require disobedience.

“Rei?” The voice startled her for a second, before she recognized the man it belonged to.

Him.

Rei turned her head to look at him, lowering her eyes instinctively. “Yes, Commander Ikari?”

He was standing by the locker room bench, arms in his pockets, his stony gaze looking her over. Something heavy pressed down on Rei’s sore chest, taking away most of her breath, and making her incredibly aware that the world was suddenly spinning. She did not close her eyes to wait for the sickness to pass. She stood her ground and willed herself to remain still.

“Are you ready?” Gendo Ikari asked, his words dull and so emotionless it made her wonder if they were inscribed in stone.

“Yes.” Rei remembered how she—how Rei Ayanami—felt when around Commander Ikari. She liked him and thought of him as a father. She knew he would protect her, never hurt her. But that had been someone who had actually grown up with him, and in whom he had an interest. The girl she was now did not share that bond.

She was a realist, a term she’d heard used by their teacher at school and then looked up to learn its meaning. She understood the difference between who she had been and who she was. Understood that she could not take the place of the girl who had been lost. She wasn’t Rei Ayanami, just a replacement with the name and soul of someone else.

The human mind was a blank page at birth, an empty construct to be filled with the hubris of growth and experience in a changing world. Sin and virtue—love and hate—were things to be learned and defined by interaction. But Rei had merely inherited them.

Her mind was a book that had already been written.
The world was not hers to experience.

“Dr. Akagi has modified Unit-00’s test parameters.
She is confident it will work this time,” Ikari told her.

“Yes. I am sure it will.” Rei felt her words were empty, merely an echo of the meaninglessness she felt within. It was what he wanted her to say, so why bother with something else?

Ikari nodded. Hands still in his pockets, he moved closer, until he was standing in front of her, but she could only bow her head and stare at his shoes. He reached out a gloved hand, tucking it underneath her delicate chin in a strangely fatherly gesture, and lifted her head.

Rei gazed into his eyes; red meeting black.

“I know this is hard on you, but you must understand what’s at stake,” Ikari said. Because he was so much taller than her, he had to look down to make eye contact, and yet there was no condescension in the way he addressed her. That surprised her. “This is not the way it was supposed to be. It is not the way we had meant it. It is simply the way it is.”

“I do not understand,” Rei admitted. “But I do not need to understand, is that not so? I only need to do what I must.”

Ikari nodded. “And what is it that you must do?”

“Pilot Unit-00.”

“Why?” He almost seemed surprised, even though there was really no such thing as a surprise in a man like him.

“That is what you gave me life for.
That is what you require of me.”

“Yes, indeed it is,” Ikari said. “But I will also require one more thing. If the time should come when I find myself in the position of having to risk your life, you should know that there is something more important you must do. You must survive. No matter how painful. Before, when the Dummy System was fully operational, you would have been considered disposable. But that time has passed. You are my best hope we have for the future. And if you are to fulfill your purpose, you must survive.”

You are MY best hope for the future.

Rei saw the words appear vividly in her mind. As she did, she knew they were true. With guileless red eyes, she looked at the man, no, the monster which stood before her, and fought the urge to wrap her fingers around his throat. She could kill him if she really wanted. She could activate Unit-00 and destroy him, his world, his hopes. But then her purpose would be gone. By killing Gendo Ikari, she would also be killing herself.

“Rei,” Ikari demanded. “Do you promise?”

Rei was taken aback but gave the expected answer regardless. “Yes.”

“Good.” He moved his hand, taking with it Rei’s last human contact. He did not bid her farewell or good luck or anything else; he just walked off, moving silently and slowly with the strong, reassured stride of someone in total control.

Rei took a step to follow him. That was as far as she got.

It was as though a button had been pressed and her balance disappeared. She stumbled, trying to brace against the nearby wall of metal lockers, her head spinning. She fell ungracefully, collapsing in a heap of white and blue. She lay there for a moment, gasping for air through clenched teeth, fighting the urge to vomit.

And then she began pulling herself up, whimpering from the effort. She forced her body to stand, leaning heavily against the front of the nearest locker and finding handholds where she could, the grip pads on the palms of her gloves providing some traction. Her body protested. The fall had now added a distinct throbbing quality to an already flaring headache.

When she was reasonably certain that she would not be hitting the floor again, Rei took a step. Her balance was unsteady but workable. She was careful to walk slowly, and not to stumble—she could not afford to. There would be no getting up again.

* * *

“Second and third set connections have been cleared,” Aoba called out from his station, drawing the attention of the two women standing at the observation window. “Approaching borderline.”

“What’s Rei’s status?” Maya asked, turning her head towards Aoba, her face lined with worry. For the last twenty minutes, she’d been carefully studying Unit-00 through the thick armored window panel, more because it would make her feel better than out of any practical need. Visual inspections were good, but, obviously, at this stage no inspections would or could spot problems better than the MAGI computers.

Beside her, Doctor Ritsuko Akagi stood with her hands deep in her lab coat pockets and her eyes glinting in the harsh light. She didn’t look worried in the slightest. Maya absolutely envied her composure.

“Pilot condition is green,” Haruna confirmed. “Heart rate and breathing have quickened; beta waves are elevated. But everything is still within parameters. No anomalies on the A-10 pattern.”

“Good. Keep an eye on her,” Ritsuko said. She looked at Maya. The young Lieutenant bit down on her lip. “Relax, Maya. We purged the systems and reloaded a new interface shell. Any problems we encounter this time around should be minor.”

We still don't know what the problem with the old shell was, Maya thought. But she nodded anyway. “Thanks for being here to oversee the test. I know you’ve been busy.”

“Don’t mention it. I’ve put a lot of work into this as well. It’s only prudent I see it to the finish. But I have to admit, I wouldn’t have bothered with the paint. Rei was ready yesterday.”

“One-point-four to borderline clearance,” someone announced. Maya didn’t recognize the voice. She returned her attention back outside the window.

Beyond the glass Unit-00 remained still. The metallic blue finish of its round head and new armor, scrapped from half a dozen sources, and even from Unit-02’s spare parts pool, did an incredibly good job concealing the hurried and desperate nature of its assembly. There had been some consideration about whether they should bother painting it at all, but Maya figured it would buy Rei some additional time to recover while the paint dried. As before, the single red eye stared unblinkingly into space, giving the Unit the appearance of a gigantic, unmoving cyclops.

None of the Evangelions had been designed or built with their intended pilots in mind. They were tweaked in order to maximize their performance with a particular child in the same way other war machines could be altered to achieve greater destructive power. But since it was impossible to determine who could become an Eva pilot at birth, the individual units could not be built to suit any one person. Cores could be swapped out based on certain criteria Maya herself did not fully understand,

but she assumed these were based on a pilot's particular needs or requirements. Software could also be written and changed to gain performance advantages, which was what they had attempted with both Unit-00 and Unit-02—so far without much success.

Yet for all their modular variability, the Evas somehow always seemed to reflect a part of their pilot's personality. It was as if a particular pilot was meant to be matched up with a specific Evangelion unit. Previous cross-synchronization experiments had shown the links formed between the pilot and the Eva were not unlike those between children and their mothers, although completely artificial, and just as hard to break or replace. That was the basis for why each Child could only pilot his or her Eva. And in time, at some primordial psychological level, the characteristics of the living were passed onto non-living technology.

Unit-00 was no different; it shared Rei's aura of quiet mystery and, as it turned out, a level of quiet unpredictability. Maya had learned a lot about it in the last few months, through long sleepless nights and plenty of hard work. But she still didn't like that someone had decided to mess around with the software at the last minute.

"Borderline cleared!" Haruna announced, standing from her console, obviously excited. "Final connections enabled. Pilot's brain waves are normal, pulse normal. Evangelion Unit-00 has been activated!"

There was a general sigh of relief as those words echoed through the control room. Someone cheered—Aoba, Maya guessed. She looked over at Ritsuko. The older woman in turn looked at her with something akin to pride on her face.

“You really don’t give yourself enough credit, Maya. You can’t succeed if you are always ready to fail. This is your success. Congratulations.”

Maya blushed and nodded. But before she could offer her gratitude at being complimented by someone she admired in the way she did Ritsuko, the blonde doctor had already turned to the bank of technicians behind the two of them.

“Open a channel to the pilot.”

Hyuga nodded and did as he was told. “Channel’s open, Ma’am.”

Ritsuko stepped from the window and moved towards one of the terminals, making the young technician sitting there tense noticeably. “Rei, can you hear me?”

“Yes.” Rei’s voice was weak, little more than a whisper carried over the speakers as if she were standing right there with them.

“We are done with the activation now.” Ritsuko said. She cast a look in Maya’s direction. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

“That’s good to hear,” Ritsuko said. “Alright. Do you think you can handle the mobility test? We will start at the most basic.”

That was really an unnecessary question, and everyone present—certainly everyone who’d ever spent time around Rei Ayanami—knew it. Maya would never accuse Rei of being a liar in that self-interest was required in order for something to be a lie and Rei possessed no such thing. She was as selfless as they came to the detriment of her own health. The expected answer was not long in coming. The only answer Rei would ever have given.

“Yes,” Rei said.

Maya had her doubts, and she really didn't want to push it, but Ritsuko wasted no time giving the next order. "Let's proceed then. Mobility test, phase Alpha."

"Ma'am . . ." Maya was ready to protest but held back at the last second. After her last screw-up with the Lazarus project, that might not be a good idea. She was already on thin ice as it was.

Her reluctance must have shown in her tone or her face, because Ritsuko was quick to give her a disapproving, narrow-eyed glance. The short-haired lieutenant suddenly felt as though she was back in class, being reprimanded by a teacher for a sub-par term paper she had obviously thought was good enough to make the grade and wasn't.

Obviously, Maya was not an idiot. She realized her relationship with Ritsuko was exactly like that. She was the younger student who sometimes failed to make her instructor notice her, and Ritsuko was just like those professors. Cold, detached, uncaring. And nothing would stop Maya from trying to impress her.

"Any objections, Lieutenant?" Ritsuko asked.

Maya shook her head no.

"Good." Ritsuko nodded. "Let's get this over with. Leave the communication channel open. Rei, do you hear me? You are to report any anomalies."

"I understand."

A series of acknowledgments followed as a flurry of activity took over the crowded control room. But even as the technicians busily typed commands at their stations, Maya felt one or two sets of eyes land questioningly on her.

She turned back towards the armored window and looked at the cage beyond, imagining that inside the blue Evangelion the First Child could very well be looking at her. Maya shook her head slowly and mouthed a silent apology. Just in case.



Russian Foreign Minister Boris Alexandrovich Vassiliesky was used to being respected by anyone he came in contact with—as it should be, he considered, for a representative from the second most powerful nation on Earth. Naturally, he had been extremely annoyed when Gendo Ikari refused to meet him on the schedule set by his office and instead arranged his own meeting.

To top it off, Ikari appeared totally indisposed to conceal his growing pleasure at the Russian government's willingness to align themselves on his good side. He knew very well that when people want something they are likely to be unusually accommodating. Vassiliesky knew as well, so he could hardly blame the man, but he could resent him.

“Despite what the UN says, the Russian Federation, as you know, is very interested in what NERV has to offer,” the Foreign Minister said, setting down his teacup on the little plate that had been provided.

“Yes, of course. I am merely skeptical of your motives,” Gendo Ikari said, with a sly, calculated smile. “The Evangelion technology is not just for showing off. I must have strict assurances that you will use this gift judiciously. Some others have already disappointed me in this regard.”

They were sitting across from each other in one of NERV's most private conference lounges, with several of Ikari's Section 2 people and Vassiliesky's own SPETSNAZ-trained security guards acting as sentries. The only ones that were allowed to move back and forth were the waiters that brought dinner, and the Minister's personal aide.

"Your point is well taken, but I assure you, your fears are unjustified," Vassiliesky said. "My government handled thousands of nuclear weapons for fifty years. Never in that time did we adopt the cavalier attitude of our enemies. We are cautious to the extreme. The same could be said for whatever technology we borrow from you."

Ikari nodded. "Yes, you sound a lot like America when it asked us to grant them this same technology," he said, lacing his fingers in front of his face. "We foolishly did, thinking that the Americans could be trusted. But now you see what's happened. The Americans are trying to push us out of their country. They don't believe they need us anymore."

"Russia is not America," Vassiliesky said slowly, making emphasis on every word. "We remember those who help us, and never forget an affront. Go ask the Germans or the Poles."

"I am well aware of that," Ikari replied. "Russia is even more dangerous than America. Still, danger is a matter of perspective. And you are committed if nothing else. On that account alone, I am willing to offer you a deal."

Vassiliesky leaned forward on his chair, decidedly interested. "I knew you'd see sense. Very well. Let's hear this offer."

"I will allow your country access to what you want but I will require something of the utmost importance to NERV," Ikari began.

“If you refuse then I will have no other option but to ask you to leave immediately.”

“You don’t leave me many options, Ikari,” Vassiliesky said.

“We are not the sort to make decisions on the spot.”

“Who needs options?” Ikari said matter-of-factly.

“This is my offer. Will you take it?”

“And what is it that you want in return?”

“A spare.”

Vassiliesky thought about that, judging how much information to reveal. Then he laughed. “So, you know about that?”

“Unfortunately,” Ikari said. “I don’t know whether I should be offended that you have begun to move ahead with the next stage of your plan before being granted what you need to complete phase one. It presents me with more arrogance than I feel comfortable dealing with.”

“A weapon is useless if it cannot be deployed on the battlefield,” Vassiliesky said. “Even one as powerful as the Evangelion. And an Evangelion is not much use without a pilot. I’m sure a man like you understands perfectly. I would not be asking for technical data and making deals unless I knew it was workable, and we are sure that it is. But I find it strange that you would require this from us.”

“My organization has been infiltrated, so I must outsource.” Ikari looked at him evenly, his gaze robotic. His face did not betray the slightest hint of emotion. “You are doubtful, which is permissible given the nature of my request. What do your instincts tell you?”

*That it would be easier to hire you rather than trying to fight you.
Perhaps we should.*

“My instincts tell me that you are a snake in the grass,” Vassiliesky began and then he broke into a smile. “That you are dangerous in the extreme. And that the devil would be foolish to make a deal with you.” He paused, grinned. “Are you sure you do not have Russian blood?”

“I am afraid not,” Ikari said.

“A pity, really,” Vassiliesky said. He grabbed one of the glasses in front of him, poured himself some vodka and drank. It was not the best. Japanese vodka was always lacking. “Anyway, we can do what you ask. Just as an Eva unit cannot work without a pilot, a pilot cannot work without an Eva unit. But please, put your offer in writing. I’ll pass it along to my government as the best option available. Then it’ll be up to the boss. He will most likely approve it if I recommend it. Of course, this is all assuming NERV keeps its end of the bargain.”

“Nothing in writing,” Ikari countered. “I would not be so careless as to sign my name to a piece of paper with such terms. I know you understand the reasons. Thus, I insist you pass along my message, personally if you must.”

Vassiliesky paused, considering. A trip to Moscow didn’t trouble him—he’d be there tonight should he require it. What bothered him was the Comrade President wanting to know why he’d made the trip at Ikari’s behest. Russian ministers were nobody’s couriers. On the other hand, the potential behind this proposition was simply staggering. “Very well,” he concluded. “I shall do as you request, as a personal favor.”

“We must see results before you are allowed access to the requested information. NERV will keep its word so long as you keep yours,” Ikari said. “Otherwise, I appreciate your sincerity.”

Vassiliesky nodded his agreement. He was not entirely convinced of the other's motives, and the reverse was probably true. However, trust and respect were not mutually exclusive in these sorts of dealings. At least as long as one had something the other wanted. "You drive a hard bargain, Ikari."

"A necessity. I wouldn't have lasted very long in this position if I didn't."

"Nor I in mine," Vassiliesky raised his glass again. "But I must insist, allow me to bring the vodka next time. This stuff is lethal."

* * *

The two of them sat together at the dinner table for what felt like the first time in ages. Shinji had cooked, much to Misato's gratitude and surprise. She was getting pretty bored with the watery soups, synthetic meats and other tasteless concoctions provided by the large majority of Central Dogma's cafeterias, all hit hard by the ongoing cost-cutting measures.

The fact that Shinji had taken it upon himself to cook on his own initiative—as opposed to being asked—also showed he was coping, going back to some sense of normalcy, even if he still wasn't going to school. The silence, however, . . . that was not such a good sign.

Misato had always loved Shinji's cooking, but no matter how hard she tried to enjoy it, the awkward stillness in the room made her feel decidedly uncomfortable. They hadn't spoken about Asuka in days. Shinji seemed as keen to avoid the subject as Misato was to make sure he was doing alright. She tried not to look at him, fearing she might increase the remorse she knew he obviously felt. Then he would leave and end up locked in his room again, and that was the last thing she thought he needed.

"I'm finished," Shinji said. He set his chopsticks down on the table, next to his plate.

Misato lifted her gaze from her own plate, only half-empty, and looked at the boy across the table. He was a picture of sullen dejection. His shoulders sagged as if some invisible weight were pushing down on them. His whole posture slumped forward. His head hung low, and even the pale blue orbs of his eyes seemed bleaker than she remembered.

Shinji had always had sad eyes. It was just one of those things where somehow the physical attributes of a person reproduced and often amplified some inner quality or emotion, like Asuka with how her red hair matched her fiery personality. Misato knew Shinji was a gloomy, quiet kid, perhaps more so than anyone that age should be, but sad was a different level entirely. Gloomy was usually a disposition towards the future. Sadness stemmed from something which had already happened and could not be changed.

Sadness could not be fixed, no matter how much Misato wished she could.

"Dinner was very good, Shinji. Thank you," she said in a tone as cheerful as it was forced. But it was still an honest compliment, and better than letting another stretch of awkward silence linger between them. "You really outdid yourself."

"I . . . I'm glad," Shinji replied in a whisper, his head down. He didn't look glad in the slightest. "I didn't know what else to do. There's no one else to cook for, so when you said you'd be home early . . ."

"I guess I should be home early more often," Misato said. "Maybe if things had been different, you could have become a chef." As soon as the words left her lips, she realized she hated them.

They made it sound like such a possibility was gone forever when that really was not the case. Shinji was young. He had his whole life ahead of him. He became an Evangelion pilot through fate and desperate necessity, but that wasn't all he could ever be.

"Maybe." Shinji pushed his plate away and rose slowly to his feet. He still wouldn't look at her. "Uh ... Misato, can I ask you a question?"

Misato had a good idea of what was coming. She braced herself. "Sure, you can ask me anything. What is it?"

Shinji swallowed awkwardly, hands clenching repeatedly at his side "I ... I just wanted to know ... Ayanami—Rei, she ... I can pilot Eva. That's what you need me to do, right? I can pilot it. I can do anything. But Rei ..."

"You want to pilot so she doesn't have to?" Misato finished for him. *God, if only it were so simple. But it never is.*

"Yes," Shinji said, his voice acquiring an uncharacteristic assertiveness. He raised his head and met her eyes. "I'll do anything. I won't complain. I won't disobey orders. Please. Just don't make her ..." he stopped suddenly. Misato realized he was only now registering the look of regret on her face. His head dropped again. "Sorry."

Say something, she thought. You owe him that much.

"I don't understand why Rei chooses to do what she does, Shinji," Misato said softly. "But she does. Nobody makes her do it. I think maybe she's aware that we've been living on borrowed time—that sooner or later we'll need the Evangelions. You are one thing. You can fight, but Asuka's out of the question."

The redhead's name caught Shinji by surprise. He swallowed whatever protest he wanted to make.

A shadow settled over his young face. Remorse. Grief. Hurt.
All at once. It was impossible to really tell.

Much too late, Misato realized she'd made a mistake,
although not on purpose. "Never mind. Forget I said anything.
You still can't go on stand down, the Comman—"

"I ... I didn't mean to hurt her," Shinji suddenly blurted out.

"I know, Shinji."

"I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Shinji ..."

"I didn't mean for her to go away!
I didn't mean to make her cry! I didn't—"

"That's enough!" Misato raised her voice, hating herself for it.
But she had to—she needed to stop him before he started down a
road there would be no coming back from. "We never mean for bad
things to happen, Shinji. But they happen anyway. It's a part of life.
All we can do is make sure that when bad things do happen,
we always try to find a way to overcome them. I don't think I'm the
one you should be saying these things to, either. There's only one
person who should know you didn't want to hurt them.
And it isn't me."

He looked down miserably.
"I just ... I don't know how to deal with this."

"With what?" Misato asked. "Only you and Asuka know what
really happened between you. Only you and Asuka can fix it
together. No one else. At the very least, you should be able to talk.
Even mortal enemies can manage that. Why can't you?"

"Because it hurts!" Shinji cried out. The admission seemed to hit
him like a physical blow.

His face wrinkled, his young features twisting with anguish.

"I can't just talk to her. I want to, but I can't. And it hurts."

"It hurts because it's important to you. So is she. But you can't fix this if you don't talk. That's not how this kind of thing works.

Trust me, I know. If it really bothers you, if it really hurts, then TALK to Asuka. Even if you think she will hate you for it.

Because it can't get any worse than this. Can it?"

Shinji shook his head as dejection pulled at his expression. He looked so miserable Misato really had no idea what else she could do.

Neither of them said anything else for a while.

The silence hung in the warm kitchen air like a heavy blanket, pushing aside the smell of freshly cooked food and filling their senses with something far less pleasant.

There was hardly any need for him to tell her that he was sorry in the first place. She had known him long enough to realize he wouldn't hurt a fly without provocation. It wasn't in his nature in the same way that confrontation was in Asuka's.

Again, she regretted the decision to bring them together, to even dare to imagine that their personalities could peacefully coexist. This was as much her fault as anyone else's.

Finally, Shinji turned around.

"I'm going to bed." He picked up his plate and put it in the sink, then he started walking towards the living room before stopping again and turning back. "Misato?"

"Huh?"

"Would you mind taking out the trash tonight?
I know it's my turn, but I'm ... just too tired."

He could have asked her to quack like a duck and she would have done it. He could have asked for a lot more. There was almost nothing she wouldn't do for him; to make him be happy and smile and just enjoy life again. She'd move Heaven and Earth. She'd kill people. She'd even do ... what she once offered.

No, Misato instantly told herself. *That was wrong then and is wrong now*. But thinking about that particular incident merely reinforced the sense that she was completely unprepared for the role she was attempting to play. She wasn't a mother, to either Shinji or Asuka; she was just a stand-in, an unwed matron who was little more than filler.

"That's fine, Shinji." Misato waved him off with her hand. "I got it. Some fresh air will do me good."

"Thank you," Shinji said. He began to leave.

"Ah, wait. Before you go, there's one more thing," Misato added quickly, remembering the last report from Section 2. This was something she needed to bring up while she still could. "I know I gave you permission to see Rei, but you're not on vacation, you know. You have to go to school tomorrow. Promise me that you will."

"I ..."

"Asuka won't be there, so don't worry about dealing with her. But you have to go. The war against the Angels won't last forever, and when it's done you need a future. So, promise me."

"I ... I will," Shinji said. "I just didn't—"

"I know." Misato understood. She forced a smile. "Good night, then. Sleep tight."

Shinji lowered his head as he shuffled out of the kitchen, saying nothing. Misato watched him go, then grabbed her iced coffee drink, now quite warm, and took a long gulp. God, she missed alcohol.

Did I cross a line making him go to school? She wondered. He can't sit around like this forever. And he shouldn't be alone even if he wants to. That just makes everything worse.

Shinji might not agree—in fact, she was almost certain he didn't—but Misato knew this was important. School, like cooking, represented a future apart from the Evangelion; things that could open many doors later on in life.

They also represented distractions which could take his mind off his present troubles. He still had friends in school, and that always helped. It certainly would do more than letting him lock himself up and spend entire days dwelling on his pain. Misery loved company, sure, but it loved loneliness more. And that was probably the absolute last thing Shinji Ikari needed.

Sighing, Misato pushed her chair back and went to gather the trash. She threw it all into a single black plastic bag, slipped on her shoes and headed outside. The night was hot and humid, the sky clear. Above, peering through the opening in the building's courtyard, she saw the stars as tiny pinpricks on a black canvas. One of those, she hoped, was Kaji.

I'm doing the best I can, Misato thought. I don't know if that's enough. But if it's not, please let me know. Please tell me I'm being stupid. This time I'll be sure to listen.

The stars offered no reply, only their cold and distant indifference.





The main control room inside Central Dogma was built in tiers that reflected the command of the organization itself inside a cavernous space.

The main deck was essentially the ground floor, although it was built roughly halfway up on the superstructure that took up the room's near wall. The Commander's deck was perched highest on the structure that made up the top tier. The floor plan was geometric, resembling a triangle with a MAGI computer located at each point and stations laid out around the perimeter. It was a modern castle, humanity's last bastion against the Angels.

At the front, the room contained a huge multi-layered tactical display, the world's biggest holographic device. The hum of machinery was constant but little more than pleasant white noise. Due to the need to control light intensity for the holograms, most of the room was plunged in darkness, making the tiny lights in the further parts twinkle like stars in the night.

Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki watched the nearest computer screen as the information was transferred from the Test Facility to the separate consoles and then to the MAGI's main database for analysis. Although it wasn't his custom, he was presently standing on the main deck watching the technicians in front perform their assigned duties.

They were all young men and women. Being among them made Fuyutsuki feel as though he was back in Kyoto, teaching the future generations. Each of these youngsters was an Einstein in potential, a Heisenberg.

A Yui Ikari.

Fuyutsuki smiled to himself at the memory. But it was also a sad one—in the end her success meant an end for the potential of youth. Yet another sacrifice for a chance at a new beginning. It would not be long now. Evangelion Unit-00 was working, even if only with the old programming, and Doctor Akagi had made good progress on the Dummy System. Gendo Ikari was close to attaining his goal, and if NERV could survive the next few days, it would achieve a level of influence comparable only to that of SEELE itself.

Fuyutsuki was more concerned with his immediate superior than with the old men, though. He knew that Ikari was not pleased with the overall delay of his Complementation Project, and that he was even angered by having to divert his original plan to make room for all the issues that had surfaced since the last Angel, particularly Rei.

The universe worked like that; entropy and uncertainty were variables that could not be eliminated, only compensated for.

Had the UN tried to destroy them, all the restrictions to Complementation would have been removed and Commander Ikari would have been able to do as he wished without any fear of repercussions. But because of Rei, and the element of entropy her last act created, they could no longer guarantee their success. Her loss was the crippling blow that compelled them to be political. Gendo Ikari could only welcome the extra time. He'd had to postpone his plans and alter them in such a way that he could secure SEELE's non-intervention. But Rei was the key.

Yui would have liked for him to wait anyway. Perhaps until her son could know the truth. It was difficult to say.

"Commander, I think you should see this," Lieutenant Makoto Hyuga called up to him from his station on the far left side of the central computer bank. The Sub-Commander made his way to the computer console and peered intently at the screen.

“What is it?” said Fuyutsuki.

“The MAGI have detected an anomaly in the Earth’s electromagnetic field,” Hyuga said, pointing to a spike on his computer readout. “Strong enough to trigger our sensors.”

“What does it mean?” asked Fuyutsuki.

“Well it’s . . .”

Before Hyuga could finish that sentence all of the alarms went off at once. The control room was plunged into a chaos of sirens and claxons. Fuyutsuki ordered them disabled immediately. The red emergency lights flashed everything with a deep crimson, the color of blood. Operators scrambled to their consoles and began typing commands furiously.

“Lieutenant, I need information,” the Sub-Commander demanded.

“The MAGI doesn’t know, sir,” Hyuga replied, fingers racing on his keyboard with extraordinary speed. “The magnetic anomaly has changed. It looks like an EMP shock wave spreading outwards from a central point.”

“EMP? Location?” Fuyutsuki asked and waited for the answer he already knew was coming. Surely, this was it. They had finally done it.

“Eastern Asia. China. Beijing.”

“The Sixth Branch,” Fuyutsuki said. He had a sudden empty feeling in his stomach. “Get the feed from the UN satellites. Invoke the highest query priority and encrypt everything you can.”

“Satellite signal is up,” Lieutenant Haruna Hiei announced, rising from her station in the middle of the computer bank,

a desperately worried expression on her face as she turned towards the Sub-Commander. “Ah, sir ...”

“Relay to the main display.”

The immense holographic screen at the front of the room came to life with a satellite image of Eastern China, with borders and cities superimposed on a separate layer by the computer. The small letters on the bottom left corner identified it as UNS CommSat 46. The screen changed from the graphics to a very fuzzy image, the usual for long distance transmissions. MAGI engaged its filter automatically.

As the image began to clear, the picture of China zoomed in on the Beijing coordinates. The image was held for a few seconds, and the camera, or whatever it was up there on the satellite, started to rotate. In the time it took for the picture to clear again the sense of alarm that had gripped all those in the control room turned to horror. Even Fuyutsuki, who thought he knew what to expect, felt his chest tighten with dread.

All reports stopped. No words were sufficient. No description which anyone could make would compare to the image. Instead, they stared silently as a dome of light expanded rapidly across the vast landscape in front of it, consuming everything in its path.

Shigeru Aoba, standing by his console, was the first to react. He said something, but Fuyutsuki didn't catch it. He guessed it was either a curse or a prayer. He decided on the latter and wondered if he too should be willing to start asking for God's forgiveness.

No, he decided. We still have weapons. And we have the will to fight.

More and more of the Earth below became incinerated by the tidal wave of energy and fire. The image was filled with the grotesque light, so vast that it disappeared into the horizon and set the sky ablaze.

Fuyutsuki shook his head. “Well . . .” he said softly. “It has finally happened. They seem to have activated Unit-A after all. Give me a zoom into the middle of that blast. Maximum resolution, please. Filter the noise out.”

He didn’t know who executed the order, but someone did.

“Oh, God . . .” Haruna’s shocked whisper came as the image zoomed in and displayed a gigantic, familiar shape stirring in the fire—an image which every single person in the room knew. The shadow of everything keeping them safe. With a key difference. “Is that . . . Unit-A? It has wings?”

“Yes, it has wings,” Fuyutsuki said. “That is not so unusual. The mass production series has wings as well. And I’m willing to bet it knows how to use them.”

“But how can it . . .” Haruna asked, then gasped when the obvious and—Fuyutsuki knew—incorrect answer struck her. “It’s an Angel!”

The Sub-Commander nodded. He was actually relieved he didn’t have to speak the lie. Miss Haruna had unknowingly done it for him, and from there, that seed would sprout. For the moment, he was certain no one would question it.

“I think we’d better start praying for a miracle, sir,” Aoba said.

Fuyutsuki cocked his head. He turned and locked eyes with the long-haired operator. “Prayers are for men without hope, Lieutenant. We are not at that stage yet,” he said. His voice returned to its usual tone. The shock had waned. Now he had to do his work.

“Inform the Commander. Establish Alert Condition Yellow. Let’s begin, shall we?”

To his surprise, everyone nodded. Everyone resumed their stations and set about their business while the inferno raged on the screen before them. Fuyutsuki filled with pride. They are the best class he’d ever had. His best students, with the exception of one incredible woman.

*Yui, we will be in your hands soon. Again.
I’m sorry it came to this. But we had to.*

We had to.

* * *

Far below the watchful eye of UNS CommSat 46 the city of Beijing, China, was no longer a city. It was a hellish cauldron of noise and fire, of light and death. The wave of light expanded and blasted everything in its path. The earth shook, the sky darkened and then became alive with fire, and for that instant it seemed the world had come to an end.

In the center of this hell, hovering over the ruins of NERV’s Sixth Branch HQ, a ghostly shape straightened itself out of the ashes of the devastated city, a creature so powerful that the whole world lay incinerated at its feet. The creature roared among the flames, its eyes alight with the fire of its own power. Its wings stretched out towards the heavens; its arms spread apart as if offering itself in sacrifice to an obscure creator.

The monster, trapped in an Evangelion’s body, bellowed angrily to proclaim its birth, and the entire world trembled.



*“Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?”*

—William Blake

Genocide 0:05 / Advent

The Queen herself was already out in front, but only when she moved the Queen’s side Rook into K1 did Ritsuko Akagi feel her position was finally developed. She looked up across the board of small black and white pieces and waited. Opposite her, Gendo Ikari’s face remained as unreadable as ever.

I suppose I’m lucky he didn’t agree to poker, Ritsuko thought. She could have suggested it, despite not being in the mood for bluffing; that was also more of Ikari’s territory. But Ritsuko wanted action, a rare commodity lately, and to put an end to the wait. If she was honest, she had not expected to play anything at all. When Ikari asked her to his office, she’d imagined, for a brief moment of happiness, that he wanted more.

She should have known better. After the man had rebuked her and locked her up for destroying the old Dummy System, he had not so much as bothered going to see her until the day he came to release her. Not for her sake, but because he needed something from her.

And yet Ritsuko had still obeyed. She had been, despite all the efforts, unable to find a real reason to refuse. NERV was her life's work. Outside of these walls, it could truly be said she had nothing. Well, nothing besides hope.

Hope that he still felt something. That he didn't just think of her as a discardable asset. That she meant something to him.

Ikari responded to her move by castling on the King's side, unpinning his Bishop but leaving his Queen undeveloped. That was just fine with Ritsuko. She licked her lips, relishing the moment before her plan went into action.

With a slow, measured movement, she moved her Queen's Rook up and captured the Bishop on K7, not even glancing at the board as she did so. There was no need. Ikari accepted her sacrifice wordlessly, taking her Rook with his Queen.

He's good with Queens, Ritsuko thought, feeling a pang of bitterness. Using them. Touching them. Discarding them. All except one. That one he just copied and then tried to pretend she was the same.

She tried not to think of Rei Ayanami when she didn't need to, but it was always difficult. Those strange red eyes set on that face—a face which did not belong to her—never failed to make her blood boil. It was a borrowed face. A dead face. And it should have stayed that way. Not for lack of trying, obviously. Even now, when Ritsuko saw her, she wished she could wrap her hands around that slender neck and squeeze.

But she couldn't. Rei's death would mean her own, something that was already made clear to her the moment she agreed to be released. It was one of the conditions. This Rei was the last. Her end would be the end of everything they'd worked for, and while Ritsuko didn't especially care, she was not suicidal either. In death she couldn't achieve what she really desired.

She moved her Queen to Bishop 3, applying pressure on the pinner King's Knight. It couldn't be moved now or else Ikari's Queen would die to her own Bishop. A fitting position.

Ikari leaned forward, his eyes flickering behind his glasses, thinking but not worried. He was reaching for his King—he only had two moves, either King to Knight 2 or King to Rook 1—when the phone's electronic beeping broke the silence.

Without even looking, Ikari reached a hand under his desk, retrieved the phone, and held it to his ear. "Yes?"

As Ritsuko considered her next move, Knight to King 4 in all likelihood, she heard the hurried whispers from the voice on the other side of the phone, too low and garbled for her to understand. Ikari nodded, suddenly becoming visibly more interested in what he was being told than the pieces in front of them, and her.

"I see," he said. "Is it confirmed?"

More garbled whispering. Ritsuko leaned back and crossed her legs. Yes, Knight to King 4 would do nicely. She had to kill that Queen no matter what. Another bitch she would need to eliminate. But not yet; not until the time was just right.

"Very well. Thank you." Ikari put the phone down and returned it under his desk.

For half a second, Ritsuko was sorely tempted to ask what that was about. Then she caught a new grimness in his eyes. And she knew.

"So, it finally happened?" she ventured. "They activated it."

"It would appear so," Ikari responded.

“How bad?” Ritsuko asked, feeling a sudden heaviness in her chest. She didn’t really care about the Chinese Branch. They brought this on themselves with their carelessness and ignorance, both cardinal sins in her view. The problem was what came next.

“I think you can guess.” As those words left Ikari’s lips, the phone rang again. He answered just as before.

Ritsuko listened in with newfound interest. The world must have descended into chaos by now, lighting up telecommunication systems with frantic calls and overloading servers in search of information. If the media had already gotten involved, the fallout was certain to be almost indescribable.

“Yes, I see,” Ikari said, looking down at the board. “In that case you may tell the Deputy Minister I will be glad to meet with him ... sometime during the week. I will be quite busy, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

There was a pause, and Ritsuko heard more garbled voices. From the noise, she could infer that whoever was on the other side of the line was not very patient or pleased.

“Very well,” Ikari said after a moment. “Assuming things develop favorably, I will agree on a temporary basis. In the meantime, I would request that our budget be reviewed. I feel neither the government nor the UN will currently offer any objections.”

Ritsuko could not tell what the actual answer had been, but it was entirely too obvious. Nothing made men more predictable than fear. The small grin which curled up the corners of Ikari’s mouth shortly confirmed her conclusion. Ikari placed the phone down, pressed a button using a gloved finger, then spoke into the headset again.

“Do not direct any more calls to my office from any outside numbers for the next twelve hours,” he told the operator. “Record any messages. Additionally, inform the Sub-Commander I will require a preliminary briefing in fifteen minutes.”

Without waiting for a reply, he hung up and turned to Ritsuko. She tried to look pleased, brushing back a lock of dyed blond hair from her eyes. “I assume this means they will agree with anything we ask?”

“As expected,” Ikari said. He must have been enormously pleased, even if he didn’t show it. The months of backstabbing and frustration, not to mention the crippling interference, were over. “Make the designation of this new Angel official. Delete all traces of any communications between us and the Chinese Branch.”

“There are no traces,” Ritsuko assured him. “I saw to that.”

“I have always had a preference for thorough women, as you know.” Ikari nodded, and for a moment Ritsuko had the distinct impression he smiled at her. Something squirmed in her chest. An old emotion she both cherished and craved to be rid of. A weakness she’d come to despise in herself.

“Then you are lucky I’m still here.” Ritsuko glanced at the board, her perfect positioning, and realized it was pointless. Much like all her efforts, her so-called achievements, and even her work with the Eva project. All for the sake of someone else. But she was determined to change that. “It seems we are already victorious.”

“Yes,” Ikari said. “Now we merely need to survive the day. Afterwards we will have all the time and money we will ever need.”

“And all it cost was an entire city,” Ritsuko replied. “Let’s hope we never have to answer for that.”

“Salvation is not cheap.”

Your salvation, perhaps, Ritsuko thought, and your wife’s. But there is no such thing without atonement. And you haven’t done any of that.

Ikari reached down and tipped over his King.

One game was over. Another was just starting.

One with a different set of pawns, yet pawns nonetheless.

That would not change so long as Gendo Ikari remained in charge.

But no king may reign forever.

Ritsuko rose to her feet and slipped her hands into her coat pockets. “I’ll see to my affairs. There’s a few loose ends with Unit-00 I need to tie up.” She took out her pager, holding it in front of her for Ikari to see. “My leash. In case we have more developments.”

Ikari nodded. He didn’t even bother speaking her dismissal.





Junichi Nakajima waited for the black four-door vehicle to stop completely before approaching it. His eyes were looking for movement through the tinted windows.

He had been unable to gauge Kluge's present state of mind over the phone, but he could imagine the man was not very happy. The news of what happened in China had been all over the TV and radio, and in the age of information certain details had already leaked out that would have otherwise been best left hidden from the public. Ironically, the questions that were beginning to emerge in the wake of the catastrophe did not seem to relate to NERV as Nakajima would have expected.

There had always been an understanding in the international community that the Chinese were rogues, looking out only for their own interests. NERV's Chinese Branch was generally regarded as little more than a government controlled front. They were not a true branch of that particular tree. So, rather than blame NERV and Gendo Ikari for creating this crisis, the UN had now turned to them to resolve it. Only NERV possessed the Evangelion, and only NERV could stop what appeared to be another contaminated Evangelion unit, albeit one which wasn't supposed to exist.

Of course, the fact that those very same agencies had been trying to chop up NERV for months no longer seemed to matter. The UN and the Japanese government were as much at fault as anyone. But it was a foregone conclusion that neither would take responsibility. They would, however, make Ikari their savior.

Never underestimate the ability of politicians to reverse course in the face of adversity, Nakajima thought.

The passenger side door opened, and Musashi Kluge stepped from the car, followed by a bodyguard. As always, he was dressed in a black suit and a black trench coat. Despite his age and his gray hair, the Department Chief carried with him an overwhelming sense of purpose, so much so that even his bodyguard, a much younger and bigger man, seemed less threatening.

In the glare of the headlights, it was difficult to tell any details, but the lines in Kluge's face seemed to have grown deeper. His eyes were narrow, sharp, and black as coal.

Nakajima slipped his hands in his pockets. The night was cool, so he wore a gray jacket over his Ministry uniform. It was a relic of his military days, faded with the unit patches torn off. He almost slept in his uniform these days, and the jacket had been the first thing he could find when the call came. Before the horror of his failure had dawned on him.

Kluge came to a stop in front of him, his face etched with barely controlled anger.

"Chief Kluge, this is—"

That was as far as Nakajima got before Musashi Kluge smashed a fist against his face. As he stumbled back, the old man grabbed him by his jacket and drove him to the ground with a knee to the midsection.

It happened very quickly. There was no time to think, much less to react. When Nakajima realized what had happened, and where he suddenly found himself, Kluge had already grabbed his collar and was pushing his head against the cold, hard pavement. He reached up with hand and tried to get the man off of him, but Kluge held him with a strength that seemed supernatural.

His head was spinning, a persistent throb driving spikes of pain directly into his brain as if with a hammer. He tasted blood. This was not at all how he imagined this would go, and yet ... somehow, he did know. He knew who he worked for. He'd heard the stories. Something tightened in his chest.

"If there is something I hate," Kluge began, his voice a low hiss as he reached into the fallen agent's uniform and retrieved the 9mm. handgun from its holster below his armpit. He clicked the safety off with a thumb and pressed the cold steel barrel against Nakajima's head, "it's people who don't know when to open their mouths."

"What-what are you talking about?" Nakajima grunted, writhing in pain. He knew then that no matter what he said he was probably about to die. "It isn't my fault." He spat blood onto the sidewalk. "There's nothing to indicate Ikari was responsible."

Kluge pulled back the gun's hammer with a solid, ominous click. His face was angry, but his narrowed eyes shone a calm fury. "Of course, he's responsible. Do you think he's been sitting around all this time? That technology had to come from somewhere. All official sources are monitored. That leaves only one option."

"NERV is bugged. We know everyone Ikari has met with for the last three or four months," Nakajima said. "There's no way—"

"You fool," Kluge roared. "It must have been a proxy or a drop off somewhere. Embassy staff. Maybe even someone in Kyoto. It was your job to find out. That's why we agreed to this. We needed information."

"There is no proof!"

"Proof only exists when you find it. Agent Nakajima, do you know what else I hate?" the Chief asked. He tightened his grip on Nakajima's collar.

“People who think I have a desk job because I’m an old man. How stupid do you think I am? I have played this game longer than you’ve been alive. We needed actionable intelligence. And you were supposed to provide it. Then we could have moved in and taken down everyone in that damn place. But now your incompetence has made him untouchable.”

Nakajima said nothing. Pushing past the pain of a nose that was probably broken, he stared up at the Department Chief with barely controlled anger. Even if he somehow shoved the older man away from him and tried to take the gun, the bodyguards would shoot him dead before he could take a step.

*I’m dead anyway so why does it matter?
Fight and die or lay down like a dog.*

That thought had barely processed when the Chief surprised him again.

“You know, I really wish I could put a bullet through your head, I really do,” Kluge said, frowning in annoyance. “It isn’t often that a man in my position is told that he can’t do something, but you seem to have friends in important places.”

“I don’t . . . have friends,” Nakajima groaned.

“Oh, but you do. You might not realize it, but you do.” Kluge turned the gun slightly, making the end of the barrel twist in place against Nakajima’s aching temple, its touch sending shivers down his spine. “If it were up to me, I wouldn’t have bothered with this charade. Talking face to face? That only happens in the movies. No, if I had my way, you’d be dead already. But that wouldn’t work for certain people who seem to place some stock in your life. I can’t say I understand. You are just a grunt, and a bad one at that.”

"I told you that . . . when you hired me." Nakajima couldn't recall that he really had. The pain inside his skull made it hard to remember anything. He was sure he must have, though. Kluge had full access to his service record, so there was no point in lying. "I've never been a spy."

The admission seemed to amuse Kluge. He grimaced, pale lips pulling back and showing nothing but teeth.

He's a wolf, Nakajima thought, and he wants blood.

"It's not about being a spy. You grab any bum off the street, you give him some gear, tell him what you need done, threaten them enough and they will do what you need them to do. A damn cat with a microphone up its ass can be a spy. Your problem is neither expertise nor training. Do you want me to tell you what it is?" Kluge said, his grinning face inching closer. "You think there's nothing more to people than what you see on the surface. You do not have the benefit of being naïve. It's simple idiocy. But people . . . people are much too complicated."

"You gave me my orders," Nakajima pointed out. "I followed them."

"You followed, yes, but blindly. And you didn't understand those orders or the outcome they were meant to produce. I bet all this time you thought that we were after Ikari as if he were some corrupt bureaucrat. I bet you thought he was harmless—as harmless as anyone with no oversight and a stockpile of weapons of mass destruction can be. And while you sat around for three months, Ikari was in motion. That was your mistake." Kluge's eyes flickered down for a second. "I bet you didn't even think I knew how to use a gun."

Nakajima tried to keep calm. It wasn't easy. He'd had guns pointed at him before, but only in combat, where the distance was much greater. A soldier hardly ever saw his enemy, and he hardly ever felt his enemy's barrel trained directly on him, or saw his face, or stared into his eyes. Chance and skill were involved in combat. At point blank range neither of those things existed. A pull of the trigger was all it would take.

He knew then Kluge was right. Despite everything he'd heard, he had underestimated the man. As he'd done with Gendo Ikari. "I thought you were the sort of man who had others do your dirty work," he admitted.

"Another mistake," Kluge sounded almost gleeful.

"You said yourself you won't kill me."

"Kill? No." The old man moved the gun away from the agent's head and pressed it against his shoulder. "But nothing was said about how badly I'm allowed to hurt you."

With my own gun, Nakajima thought. Somehow that made him feel utterly stupid.

"I'm disappointed, Nakajima," Kluge said. "And I don't like that. You won't like it either. They are going to make me prepare a statement, you know. Everyone who is someone within the Japanese Government will be there—Hell, if there were still an Emperor, he'd be there. The press will probably be there as well. If not, the details will soon leak out to them anyway. But they are going to make me stand like an idiot and explain. And what do you think they will say when I tell them we did not know?"

“I did what I could,” Nakajima replied, his voice rising.
“It isn’t my fault. You should have sent someone better!”

“What makes you think it was my choice?” Kluge said and pulled the trigger.

* * *

Despite her experience, Misato Katsuragi still felt like she was on display in a zoo somewhere as she stood at attention before Commander Ikari and Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki to deliver her initial report.

The preparations furiously being made for NERV’s first combat alert in months ensured that only a small part of the staff had gathered in the briefing room. Not many people were needed, even now, and most of those present belonged to the technical teams and upper command structure. From these select few, the necessary orders would trickle down the ranks with practiced efficiency. As a result, the room was largely empty, illuminated by the tactical screens and buzzing with the hum of computers and quiet voices.

Taking a deep breath, Misato looked down at her digital tablet containing all the pertinent details so far assembled, analyzed and summarized by the different departments—the result of some ninety minutes of frantic activity.

“As of 03:49 hours the target, which the UN has unofficially classified as the 18th Angel despite MAGI’s inability to obtain a lock on the energy pattern, began moving from its original position over the remains of the Chinese Branch outside Beijing,” Misato read, keeping her voice steady.

“Our current tracking data predicts that the target will reach Tokyo-3 in approximately fourteen hours. The UN has already and formally asked us to fulfill our defense agreement, namely the A-11 directive, and engage the target directly.”

“As expected,” Commander Gendo Ikari said from behind his hands, laced together as usual in front of his face. He sat at his illuminated console, raised slightly higher than the rest of the room, the light reflecting off his glasses giving a strangely inhuman look. “How swiftly the sheep come running back to the shepherds, don’t you think, Fuyutsuki?”

“Indeed,” the Sub-Commander said. He stood stiffly at attention behind his superior officer like a marble column, his face calm. He turned his head to Misato. “Has the UN authorized NERV’s freedom of action as per the A-11 directive?”

“Yes,” Misato said without needing to consult her information. “NERV has been guaranteed the use of any and all measures to stop the target. This includes the UN Army, the JSSDF and all other equipment that might be required.”

The significance of that statement was not lost on any of the people present, and especially not Misato. A murmur started in the half-shadows surrounding them. The UN had spent most of the last few months hampering NERV’s activities, occasionally, in openly blatant and only marginally legal ways.

Without Angels to fight, NERV was a money pit in the eyes of the bureaucrats and bean-counters, and therefore, predictably, anathema to anyone who had to worry about budgets or the expenditure of public funds. Equipment had been cut as well as personnel as a result, and NERV had ended up scraping by as best it could on what it had. But the cost on its people was more than Misato cared to consider.

Now, in a single instant of utter destruction and death, this latest threat had reversed that trend. Misato felt awful that NERV's relevance—its very survival—was directly tied to people's deaths, but it was the truth and denying it would do nothing to prevent more lives from being lost.

"Very well," Ikari said in his usual deliberate tone.
"Major Katsuragi, what is NERV's current defense capability?"

Misato knew that he most likely already had the answer, but it was still up to her to both arrange their operations logically and explain them. And although this was the sort of thing she had been trained for, she realized that she hadn't missed it now that she was forced to do it again.

People are going to die no matter what I do, she told herself, maybe even people I love. The thought left a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Not very good, sir," she said. "Unit-00's self-destruction detonation and the third Lake Ashino have eliminated many of our deployment routes and power supply relays. This has greatly hampered our ability to deploy the Eva effectively over an extensive area. We can, however, place the Evas at strategic locations in advance to intercept the target at our discretion."

"Some things never change. It has been to our advantage that the Angel has decided to come looking for us," Ikari said.
"The timing is of its choosing, the place is ours.
That is perhaps the only advantage we truly have."

Strange how no one ever seemed to find that odd, Misato wondered. Well, no one but Kaji. That ended badly for him.

"It is an advantage I intend to fully use, sir," Misato said, for the first time letting her growing resolve enter her voice.

She placed the tablet on a nearby console and glanced at the two men with stern eyes. "And any other one I can find."

"Do you have a plan, Major Katsuragi?" Fuyutsuki asked with mock surprise. It was her job, after all, even if she hadn't performed it in months.

"That is what I get paid for, sir." A pang of guilt twisted Misato's guts as she said the words, and a part of her found it hard to believe she was playing the faithful lackey again. It was as if she was watching herself from another reality, standing here, once more acting like a willing tool for others to use. But what other options did she really have? It was better to be inside NERV's tent pissing out than outside pissing in. She needed access, and this was the price.

She also knew she was the best there was for this sort of thing. If her life had to depend on someone's decisions, she'd rather they be her own. The rest she could trust to the pilots. Her loved ones. Her sad, broken family.

"Then out with it, Major Katsuragi, we do not have all morning," Commander Ikari said.

Misato nodded, then turned towards Ritsuko, who'd been sitting behind her on one of the chairs, reading the information on her own tablet. "Sorry that I haven't been able to get you in on this," Misato said. She tilted her head to Hyuga and gestured with a hand. "Show me Sierra Two, please."

The operator pressed a few buttons on his console. A holographic display flashed to life in the middle of the room, showing a 3-dimensional layout of the Hakone region. Weapon emplacements were shown as tiny yellow triangles on the map. Eva deployment routes were highlighted in both red and blue to illustrate their readiness status, forming a jagged spider web of tangled lines. The red unavailable routes far outnumbered the blue available ones.

The display then zoomed in on the lower-left quarter of the grid, indicating the south-western approach to the city, codenamed Sierra Two on the map.

Here the positions of the UN and JSSDF units were marked by green rectangles, each with small text below used to designate the unit identifications. Armored units had an oblong shape drawn inside the rectangle, while infantry units had an X.

“I plan to have the UN Army stretched out across the northwest to intercept the target as soon as it reaches Japanese air space,” Misato explained. “That will give us a chance to analyze the strength of its AT Field, probe for weaknesses and keep the UN busy and out of our way. This will be only token resistance, of course. I don’t think that we should expect any serious damage to the target, much less destroy it. But it’ll be good for the UN’s morale to be actively involved.”

The hologram moved back along the Sierra Two axis until it reached an intersection with a railway and one of the blue deployment routes. It was closer to the city than Misato would have liked, but it would have to do.

She continued. “As for the actual interception, Unit-00, in my view the most reliable Evangelion we currently have, will take position five miles southwest, behind the UN lines, and engage the target with long-range weaponry. For this, I have decided to borrow one of the new high-density plasma rifles the SSDF has been developing for us, which I will requisition myself if necessary.”

“So, you plan to use an experimental weapon in this critical situation?” Fuyutsuki asked. His tone was not exactly critical, but it carried his point perfectly.

Experimental weapons belonged in a lab, not the battlefield.

Misato had considered that. She felt she had no choice.

“The SSDF has assured me that their rifle can penetrate even the strongest of AT Fields; at least, the strongest we’ve encountered so far. I have seen the technical specifications and it should be able to handle enemies as powerful as the 14th Angel,” she said. “In my opinion, this is the only alternative to using the positron rifle again.”

“Why are you only proposing to use long-range weapons, Major Katsuragi?” Commander Ikari inquired. “Have you forgotten that the Evangelion is a weapon built for close-combat?”

“No, sir, I haven’t. But I believe that we must avoid close-quarters combat if possible. Unit-00 has not gone through a proper testing phase yet. We don’t know how it will handle—”

“I will permit you to requisition any type of weaponry that you believe will assure us the success of this operation, but it would be irresponsible to depend solely on equipment you haven’t tested in the field.”

“I understand, sir,” Misato said. “But we would be doubly irresponsible if we were to overestimate Unit-00’s combat status. There hasn’t been time for a full evaluation, and Rei isn’t exactly at peak fitness either. Even though her file says she’s fit enough to pilot, seeking out CQC as our first option is not a winning strategy. A standoff situation with long-range weapons is preferable.”

Of course, there was more to it than that, but bringing up her concerns over Rei’s safety and the potential for disaster if it came to hand-to-hand combat wouldn’t change the fact that they needed her out there. And Rei was probably a better choice than Shinji, going by Ritsuko’s medical reports. Asuka was out of the question as far as Misato was concerned.

No, it had to be Rei.

Her superiors mulled over her words carefully, as she had expected. These weren't stupid men, nor were they deaf to counsel. They understood their lives and those of the entire world were at stake.

"What contingency measures have you planned?" Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki asked, clasping his hands behind his back. "There are still N2 weapons in stock, are there not?"

"Yes. However, given prior experience, I have no reason to believe they would be very effective," Misato answered. She'd already considered that strategy and discarded it. "Sure, they make a nice explosion. That's about it. At most, we could launch a preliminary barrage and analyze the target's reactions."

"I see. Please continue your briefing."

Misato nodded. She leaned forward over the rail in front of her console and gestured to Hyuga with a hand again. Behind her, the wall-sized display flickered. It now showed the schematics of all three Evangelion units.

"We simply don't have much in the way of effective reserves. Unit-01 will be placed on standby as our second line of defense inside the Geo-Front, just in case Unit-00 is knocked out of combat. Unit-02 will also be on standby, but in its current condition it won't be of much help. If it comes down to using Unit-02 . . . we'll be as good as dead."

Ritsuko placed her tablet on the console and rose to her feet. "Unit-01 is more than capable of holding its own," she said with her usual matter-of-factness. "And in terms of hand-to-hand combat, it would likely be more effective than Unit-00."

“If that is so, why not send it together with Unit-00?” Fuyutsuki asked.

Misato was ready for that. “For several reasons. First, the destruction of our deployment infrastructure means the units and the necessary equipment will have to be deployed piecemeal. By the time the second unit is armed and activated, the Angel will be right on top. Second, there is not enough power in that part of the grid to support both units so far out. Additionally, Unit-01’s S2 engine remains totally untested. If it runs out of power ... Well, to be honest, I think we’d all rather avoid opening Pandora’s Box unless we absolutely have to. We’re in enough trouble as it is. The closer we keep Unit-01 to HQ, the easier it will be to manage its external power needs. And third,” she glanced reproachfully at Ritsuko, “Unit-01 might be combat-capable, but I fear the same can’t be said of its pilot, especially after the last week.”

The mere thought of putting Shinji in harm’s way made Misato feel sick. She hated even considering it at all. But what else could she do? The Evangelions were meant as weapons and the Children as warfighters. Ultimately that was their reason for being here. Holding Shinji back gave Rei a chance to destroy the Angel without needlessly committing him to danger.

Of course, that meant having to risk Rei’s life in exchange for Shinji’s. Misato couldn’t reconcile such a choice with her sense of morality except by telling herself that it wasn’t really a choice in the end. Someone had to be out there, and Rei was better than Shinji. Cruel as it seemed, there was no alternative.

To her relief, both Commander Ikari and Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki nodded instead of presenting any further objections.

“What about the civilians?” Again, the question came from Fuyutsuki, and Misato was glad for the change of subject.

“The local authorities already know what to do,” she said. “We’ve notified the council, but Nakajima is nowhere to be found. We will move up to Level 1 alert once the target enters Japanese airspace, and I expect the government to follow suit. The usual measures will be implemented once that happens.”

“Strange. I would not think that the Ministry of the Interior would want to be left out of the action,” Fuyutsuki said, though he did not seem surprised. “They always seemed so . . . interested.”

“Nakajima is probably halfway to Kyoto by now, with his tail between his legs. Such a brave man,” Misato replied sarcastically. She felt good saying that. After all of the trouble the government had caused NERV, she was more than entitled to have a little fun at their expense. And the criticism was not necessarily unwarranted.

If they did not wholeheartedly agree with the joke, her superiors at least did not object to it. They were no fans of the Ministry of the Interior either.

“This is all very well, Major Katsuragi,” Ikari said after a moment. “I see no reason to object to your planning, but I strongly caution you against failure.” His voice remained unemotional, as always, but it carried a hidden implication that Misato caught at once.

Failure equals death. Do not fail.

He did not have to say it. The seriousness of the situation was etched on his face—as it was on all of the faces Misato could see gathered around her.

When Commander Ikari stood up from his chair, Misato understood that the meeting was over. She saluted stiffly, then turned on her heels, signaled for Hyuga to follow her, collected Ritsuko and was almost out the door of the darkened briefing room before she heard Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki call out.

“Doctor Akagi, if you would please remain behind.”

Misato stopped abruptly and spun to face him. She ignored the odd look on Ritsuko’s face. “Sir, with all due respect, if I am to assume that I have your confidence, I can’t be left out of the loop.”

It was an impulse reaction and wholly insubordinate, but she hoped he understood her meaning. No secrets, not now.

Ikari looked at her with unflinching, hard eyes from behind thick glasses. “We have every confidence in you, Major. Rest assured. I merely need to discuss some extra-operational details with the doctor. With all due respect.”

“Your work is most appreciated,” Fuyutsuki added more pleasantly. “I’m sure there are many more important things which require your attention at this moment.”

Misato chewed on that and did not like the taste it left in her mouth. Theirs was a perfectly acceptable answer as far as operational necessity was concerned. And the reality was that plenty of things in this organization didn’t require her input. They didn’t necessarily have to be of interest to her or to what she did. But after being kept in the dark for so long, by people she was supposed to trust, she couldn’t help being paranoid.

They would never tell her everything, she knew. Not even if she knew the right questions to ask. But she wanted to believe that with thousands of lives snuffed out in an instant and an Angel on the way, her superiors would refrain from messing around with the cloak and dagger stuff for the moment at least. Surely, Gendo Ikari wouldn’t jeopardize their defense just so he could keep his secrets. His life was at stake, too.

And his son’s—if he even cared about that. Misato wasn’t certain he did.

“Excuse me, sir. I’ll take my leave.”

Ikari only nodded and said nothing.

Turning back towards the exit, Misato shot Ritsuko a warning glare, just to make things clear. The blonde’s face remained unreadable, half her features covered into shadows by the harsh electronic lighting from the monitors.

The rest of the Operation’s staff had already left by the time Misato stepped out. She closed with Hyuga in the corridor and ordered him to assemble the rest of the bridge crew and the respective Eva support crews and technical teams—for all three units—in the lower briefing room. She finished by issuing a general readiness order for everyone else.

As she walked into the elevator and the doors closed behind her, Misato looked at her watch. Dawn would not come for another hour at the earliest. Suddenly, she wished she could go topside to look at the sky one last time. She dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. Everyone would be waiting for her below, and nerves were frayed enough without her taking a detour.

I hope you are proud, Kaji, Misato told herself.
This is me being responsible.

In a few more hours she might get a chance to ask him in person. But not if she could help it.





“It’s fine if she wants to use Rei,” Ritsuko Akagi said, turning towards the Commander and away from the colored display that had shown their tactical data. “I’ve already taken certain precautions. Even if the worst should happen, it will not be a total loss.”

“I am concerned for the security of Lilith’s soul, not Rei,” Ikari replied, his eyes fixed on hers. Besides him, Fuyutsuki continued looking intently at his own screen, probably studying Misato’s plan outline. By now he should have memorized most of it.

“What did you think I meant?” Ritsuko said, shoving her hands in her lab coat. “Her body?”

“Explain,” Ikari demanded in his usual commanding tone.

“In case anything unfortunate should befall the pilot, Unit-00’s entry-plug has been fitted with a system which will ensure that the soul will not be lost,” Ritsuko said. “At the most basic level, it works in the same fashion as an electrical breaker interrupting a circuit. The life support system in the entry-plug will close the circuit upon failure, and if Rei’s life signs stop then the breaker will trip.”

“And then?” Ikari asked flatly. “I assume you have some sort of capture system.”

“In a way, yes. She will not go anywhere as long as the core remains intact. Unit-00’s core only has a partial imprint of a soul, but of course that is still too much. No matter how fragmented, two souls can’t occupy the same physical receptacle after all. As such, I have arranged for a system-wide backup mechanism to upload the most current version of the soul and terminate the old one. If something happens to Rei and she dies, the soul should be captured by this system and preserved inside the core.

Without the Dummy, however, we will not have a replacement for her body. The soul needs a shell. That can be solved later.”

To her surprise, Ritsuko found that she didn’t really feel any pleasure in talking about Rei like this. She had no love for the little abomination but losing her meant losing everything she’d worked for and thus a certain degree of emotional commitment was required. Her soul was important. More important than the Evas themselves. But as far as she cared, the body it inhabited was a genetic anomaly, a thing made by science and no more worthy of love than the result of any other useful experiment. Ikari thought differently, for reasons she didn’t agree with.

Rei’s DNA did not imply that she was at all like her donor, even if she did look like her. Ikari had never quite managed to separate himself from the second one, almost certainly due to the fact that, one way or another, he had raised her. Her loss was a hard one to stomach for him.

Not so much for Ritsuko. And the third wouldn’t be either. It was part of the reason she’d lied in her medical reports. Obviously, she hadn’t predicted it would prove so useful.

“But this soul will not be the pure incarnation of Lilith,” Ikari said, interrupting Ritsuko’s reverie. “That might become very troublesome in the future.”

“With the amount of human contact Rei’s had, there is no such thing as a pure soul anymore,” Ritsuko pointed out. “You should know that better than anyone. And since we can only transfer a soul, not re-create or copy it, we have no other recourse.”

Ikari nodded. He had no real choice, and he must have hated that. This wasn’t something he could do anything about.

Ritsuko studied him for a moment, trying to see beyond the unbreakable facade.

She might as well have been trying to read tea leaves. Normally she wouldn't bother, but she had to be tactful in making the next move.

"If you doubt my work, then perhaps we should send Unit-01 to take point instead. It's not too late," Ritsuko said, and awaited the explosion she knew was coming.

Ikari, always the enigma, surprised her once again. There was no rebuke, not even a hint of emotion.

"Yui is as important a part of the plan as Rei is," NERV's Supreme Commander calmly replied. Somehow this made Ritsuko feel uneasy; she always was when he called Unit-01 by name. She pressed on.

"We don't need Yui for Complementation." The words came out blunter than she meant them, but they were no less true. "We need Rei. Unit-01 could be restored later in case it should be badly damaged—Lieutenant Ibuki proved just how far our regenerative technology has come. But if we lose Rei's body there is no replacement at hand."

"Because you destroyed the Dummy System," Ikari reminded her sternly. "You tried to kill Rei. You have made her life extraordinarily difficult. And now you expect me to believe you are concerned for her?"

Ritsuko shook her head. "I am not any more concerned than I would be over losing a critical piece of equipment. When I said 'we' I meant 'you.' Besides, nothing I've said is factually wrong, because you do need her, and she would be much harder to replace than Unit-01. I have tried to make this contingency as bulletproof as I possibly can with the limited time I have. The problem with that is that it depends on your definition of bulletproof."

Ikari said nothing to that.

Sensing doubt, Ritsuko pressed on. “My point is, why gamble with Rei when there’s an alternative?”

“A bad alternative is as useless, and probably just as dangerous, as no alternative,” Fuyutsuki said. He raised his eyes from the data on the screen in front of him and turned his attention towards Ritsuko. “And we are already sailing in dangerous waters here.”

“I am inclined to agree,” Ikari said, sounding even more serious than normal. “But I would rather you took a more pragmatic approach to this situation, Doctor Akagi.”

Ritsuko found such a statement ironic coming from him. She had to try hard to stop herself smiling. Whatever he thought of her, however, the simple reality was that he was trapped, by Katsuragi’s naivete and her own desire for retribution.

No matter the choice he made now, Ikari would be risking something important to him, for different reasons. If Rei went out and died, then that would be the end of all his hopes. But if Unit-01 went out and was destroyed, that would be the end of HER. His Queen. The one he was willing to throw away the world for.

“What about Unit-02?” Ikari asked.

“What about it?” Ritsuko raised her shoulders in a dismissive shrug. “The Tablet’s start-up program is already in place, along with the associated safety shell. But the Second Child can’t use it. She’s much too damaged, psychologically speaking. When this is over, it might be more convenient to remove her pilot designation and find a replacement.”

“I have already begun to take steps,” Ikari said, to Ritsuko’s utter lack of surprise. Of course, he had, that was just like him. Using people and throwing them away. “The Russians have agreed to supply what we need on this occasion. We will ignore the Marduk Institute.”

“The Second won’t like that, but I suppose that’s a problem for tomorrow,” Ritsuko said. “We have our hands full today.”

She returned her attention to the hologram and touched the upper right corner with a finger so that a square button appeared. She tapped this. The image of the map flickered into static and was replaced by the video feed from one of the surveillance aircraft now trailing the Angel.

The Angel, or rather the possessed Evangelion Unit-A, looked like something out of a surrealist nightmare. It was lit up by at least a dozen spotlights so that its white armor gleamed, surrounded by an utterly black sky. The head resembled that of the mass production models it was based on, oval shaped with a long snout, but unlike the mass-produced Evas this unit had dark red eyes set on each side of the head, slanted like those of a malignant predator. Long arms dangled down below it, ending in white claws.

For something so big, its flight was incredibly graceful. Its wings were massive, and it reminded Ritsuko of an overgrown bird. Around it she could see a small fleet of aircraft—fighters, mostly—all distinguishable by their navigation lights.

“How long do you think it will take,” Ritsuko said absently, “for the UN to realize there is not supposed to be such an Angel.”

“I do not believe it matters,” Ikari replied. He didn’t show much interest in the image. His attention, and his stern face remained on Ritsuko, his glasses flickering with reflected light. “Even they would be foolish to take mysticism over actual fact seriously enough to disregard what happened in China. Their own eyes count for a lot more than ancient ink on parchment.”

“At the very least we should have a cover,” Ritsuko suggested. “We should give them a name. To make it official.”

Ikari had never been the sort to engage in subterfuge without need, but Ritsuko did not want to leave any loose ends and he would recognize that. UN analysts would hardly need to bother reading the Dead Sea Scrolls to figure out that what was currently happening ought not to be possible. SEELE would try desperately to clue them in, obviously, but their credibility—and thus their power—was somewhat diminished as of the last couple of hours. Ikari was certainly right in this. Regardless of anything else, the creature on their monitors represented a threat everyone could see with their own eyes.

Finally, Ikari turned his head towards the hologram and looked at it the way a disapproving father might look at a child. “Samael,” he said.

Ritsuko knew the name. It wasn’t one she had expected.

“The Angel of Death?” she said, slightly surprised. “Don’t you think that’s a little ominous, not to mention overly dramatic?”

“Death is just another obstacle to be overcome. They should think about that.”

No, Ritsuko realized. This is not about death. This is about—

“You want them to be afraid,” Ritsuko said. She almost had to fight the urge to smile. “Once you die, there is nothing else. It is final. The fear of death, however ... that is a powerful tool.”

The Commander stepped to the right, reaching the edge of his desk. “Make sure your preparations are ready,” he told her. Then he pressed a button on his console and his personal elevator began lowering him from sight. He was gone in seconds. The Sub-Commander, a far more sensible and less dramatic man, used the door. Ritsuko was left alone. Like always.

She sighed, looking back at the screen with the so-called Angel on it, all stark white amidst an ocean of black.

It flapped its massive wings, but without sound she could not hear them. And yet, impossibly, she could feel the noise, power, and malice behind it.

Samael ...

“And behold a pale horse, and he that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.” Ritsuko laughed bitterly and shook her head. “They will believe it,” she concluded, knowing she was right. Some men were simply too predictable. “They will believe anything if the lie is big enough. And this lie has already killed millions.”

It was her lie, too. She was just as guilty as Ikari in that regard. Whatever her reasons, no matter how she chose to justify it, she had willingly followed along behind him and executed his bidding without fail, and, at some point, even believed the lie herself. She was just as responsible.

By action or inaction, they all were.

* * *

His cell phone rang.

Shinji Ikari thought he dreamed it at first, before he realized that his eyes were open and he was actually staring at his bedroom ceiling, still in bed, with the sheets tangled around his legs. Oddly, he couldn't remember when he had woken up or when he fell asleep the night before. He could tell from the faint gray light in the room that it was early in the morning—too early even for a boy used to getting up every day for school. And he could hear the phone ringing.

With Asuka gone, his morning routine had changed quite a bit. There was no more yelling for him to get out of bed, no coaxing for him to make breakfast under threats of violence,

no excitement or energy whatsoever. He had no reason to do anything. A part of him wished he could just lay there and ignore the outside world. With no motivation and no one depending on him, why should he care? Why did it matter?

The same sort of thing had happened to him before, when Asuka had been away in the hospital, and he'd been left mourning Kaworu's death in desperate loneliness. At least in the early days, before he found a reason to get up or someone important to get up for. But Asuka ... she would make sure he did even if that required knocking down his door and dragging him out. Shinji had learned he shouldn't mind. His redheaded roommate's presence might be overwhelming, but when she was gone it never took him long to miss it.

And if she had been there, he knew she would have been yelling at him to answer the phone.

Shinji rolled out of his sheets and stood up, yawning as he removed the earbuds of his S-DAT from his ears. The music helped him sleep and forget that he was alone. Ignoring the achiness in his muscles, he fetched his book bag where he usually kept his cellphone and searched among its contents.

It only took him a couple of seconds to locate the small device. He flipped it open and held it to his ear, absently rubbing sleep from his eyes with his free hand. "Yes, good morning?" he said in a drowsy tone and sat back down on the bed.

"Shinji ..."

Shinji immediately recognized Maya Ibuki's voice, even though it was nothing more than a hurried whisper. There was simply no mistaking it—Maya's voice had always struck him as distinctly melodic, dainty and pleasant. The sort of voice which usually helped put him at ease,

and one he had become very familiar with through long hours of listening to her over Unit-01's communication system.

"Miss Ibuki?" Shinji said, yawning loudly again. He quickly covered his mouth out of politeness despite the fact that he was alone in the room and Maya couldn't see him. "Sorry, it's early," he added. "How can I help you?"

"Where are you?" Maya asked even before he'd finished speaking.

"Home," he answered. "Miss Ibuki—"

"Good. We've sent a car over to pick you up. I know it's still so early, but we have a situation on our hands. Major Katsuragi said to call you before they got there. Maybe she was concerned that you'd been watching it, I don't know. Please be ready for the pick-up."

"Misato?" Shinji hesitated, his drowsy mind failing to grasp everything. But as the cobwebs cleared and sleep receded, he realized the normally affable young woman sounded worried. Naturally, that made him worried as well. "Watching what? What's going on?"

"Trouble," Maya said. "I can't say any more right now, but we'll fill you in when you get here, okay? Oh, and please do me a favor . . . don't turn on your television. Major Katsuragi said it would be better if you didn't see."

"What?" Shinji murmured, not sure he understood. "Why?"

"Just don't. Pretty please."

He still didn't understand, but he nodded. "Uh, okay, I guess."

"Thank you. Now get dressed. Section 2 will be there in a few minutes. Ah, sorry. I have to go," Maya said abruptly, her hurried manner doing little to put him at ease. She hung up without waiting for the reply.

In the sudden silence which followed, Shinji sat holding the cellphone against his ear for a few more seconds, as if expecting another voice to materialize from the inactive speaker. Then he flipped it closed and tossed it back into his book bag, lying open at his feet.

*Home, he thought. That's where I told her I was.
But why doesn't it feel like it?*

Lifting his head, Shinji looked around his room—a room which wasn't really supposed to be one. It was actually a storage closet. When Asuka had arrived all those months ago, she'd dumped his belongings in here while she took over what had previously been his room. Even now, he didn't begrudge her for it, although perhaps he should. He just found it hard to really care. Some of his things were still in boxes so he'd never even settled in. Never made the space home.

Back then, despite Asuka being loud and rude, he genuinely hoped that they could get along. And she was an Evangelion pilot just like him. Surely, they had a lot to bond over, like he'd done with Ayanami. Now Ayanami was dead, and Asuka hated him.

He felt his stomach tighten with the anguish of those memories. Of his failures and the losses, they produced. He had failed everyone, and yet here he was, being called upon by others to help. To pilot. To just get up. He could do nothing else if he ever wanted to make things better. And he did want to, with Asuka, Rei, and everyone else who relied on him.

Shinji sighed and rose to his feet. He dressed quickly in the first clothes he found, which just so happened to be his school uniform, left draped over the back of his desk chair the night before in preparation for the school day. When that was done, he slipped open his door and walked out to the empty living room. By now, the early morning gray had begun to tinge with a light yellow as the eastern sun filtered through the balcony windows.

There was no sound at all, nothing to distract from the gloominess of a morning spent completely alone. But when he passed in front of the television, he was suddenly tempted.

Why would Misato not want him to turn it on? And why would she make a point of telling Maya? Was it something they didn't want him to see? He'd heard no alarms, and Maya had not mentioned an Angel attack. Nothing else would bother him at this point. Or so he thought.

Shinji pressed his lips together. He could almost hear Asuka's whiny voice in the back of his head saying, "Are you stupid? If they didn't want you to see something it wouldn't be on television, would it?"

And she was right. Like she usually was.

He picked up the remote and switched the TV on, briefly trying to recall which channel carried the news. Within seconds, however, he realized that was an utterly unnecessary exercise. It simply didn't matter what channel he picked because all of the broadcast networks were showing the same thing—the same video feed even—superimposed with the frantic narration of fearful commentators.

Whatever he had thought he might see, this wasn't it. Even for someone who had seen as much death and destruction as he had, the sight was shocking in its devastation; a vision of swirling fire like a burning nightmare. And in the center, a monster at once alien and painfully familiar. His heart dropped, his mouth hanging open, wide blue eyes staring. The remote dropped to the floor, bouncing between his feet.

Again, he thought. It's happened again.

There was horror on his face when the Section 2 agents rang the doorbell. Shinji almost considered not opening the door. But they expected him to, and he had no real choice in the matter.





“Hikari Horaki?” the man in the black suit and tie asked as soon as Hikari opened the door.

“Y-yes, that’s me,” Hikari replied hesitantly, rubbing sleep out of her eyes. She had become accustomed enough to the mysterious black-suited men lurking in the shadows whenever the three Eva pilots were nearby that it didn’t really scare her having one come knocking at the door so early in the morning, but she still found it very unsettling. She had not even changed out of her pink pajamas, which only added to her discomfort. “Can I help you?”

When Asuka had moved in, Major Katsuragi had promised that her Section 2 bodyguards would keep their distance. So far, they had made good on the promise, and Hikari was glad. But it seemed that was now over.

The Section 2 agent reached into his dark suit and produced an ID badge. “NERV Section 2,” he said, flashing the ID unnecessarily. He was wearing sunglasses, and his face was young but so bland and remarkable it could have been a mask. “We are here to take the Second Child into custody.”

“Custody?” Hikari blinked, now uncertain of what to even think. A million things went through her mind, most of them troubling. You took custody of prisoners, not of an Evangelion pilot. “What for? If there’s a problem, call Major Katsuragi. The Second—Asuka is fine where she is.”

*I don’t like this, she thought.
Major Katsuragi would have called ahead.*

“There has been an incident and Miss Soryu’s presence is requested,” the agent said. “I’m sorry for the disruption, but we’re short on time.”

“Did Major Katsuragi send you?” Hikari asked.

“Ma’am, I need to find the Second Child.”

Hikari realized she wasn’t going to get an explanation, and that there wasn’t a whole lot she could do about it.

“I-I guess it’s all right then,” Hikari muttered, holding her hands together in front of her, trying to hold back a cold surge of fear in her chest. Like Major Katsuragi, these men worked for NERV, and so she had to do as they said. That was the only way. In theory, Section 2 agents didn’t even need a warrant to come inside the house, nor to tap the phones and follow anyone associated with the pilots. They might as well be a police force of their own. But she also didn’t think Asuka was in any condition to go anywhere. “I’ll ... um, I’ll get her for you.”

“No,” the agent said, shuffling closer and placing one hand against the doorframe. “I will get her myself. I’m under orders. Just show me the way.”

Hikari nodded hesitantly. “Oh, sure.”

She stepped aside and let the agent into the house. As she did, she cast a wary glance outside, where the agent’s partner waited, leaning patiently against the black sedan they normally used for transport. She failed to see a gun, but it was a fair assumption that both men were currently armed.

“Ah, would you mind taking off your shoes?” Hikari said.

The agent frowned. “Ma’am, we really—”

“Please. It’s bad enough you have to come in here like this, you don’t have to make everything dirty on top of it. Okay?”

To her surprise, the man bent down and quickly removed his shoes as she had requested, leaving him only in black socks, one of which had a hole on the right side. He set the shoes aside, then straightened and turned back towards Hikari, waiting. She nodded in return, trying to show her appreciation. He might be intimidating, but at least he wasn’t rude. Points for NERV’s training program. It was certainly better than the school’s.

Closing the door behind them, Hikari led the agent upstairs to Asuka’s temporary bedroom, the room that had once belonged to her big sister’s when she still lived at home. She knocked.

“Asuka, are you up? I know it’s early, but there’s a Section 2 agent here,” Hikari called. Her voice was soft yet loud enough that she knew Asuka could hear it through the door. She made a huge effort to keep her concern from showing in her tone. It wouldn’t do to seem afraid, especially in front of Asuka. “They’re looking for you.”

No answer, nor did Hikari think they were likely to get one.

“Excuse me,” the agent said, gently placing a hand on Hikari’s shoulder and moving her out of the way. He knocked once, then without waiting for an answer slid the door open just wide enough to squeeze inside.

Hikari peered through the opening as the man in black slowly approached the bed. A bulge in the sheets betrayed Asuka’s form. She had pulled them over her head so Hikari couldn’t tell if she was asleep.

At least she sleeps now, Hikari thought with some relief. She had lost count of how many times she had heard her friend crying whenever she checked on her through the night, when she thought nobody could see or hear her.

The agent stood over the bed and said something in a very gentle tone. Hikari couldn't catch the words spoken. Asuka stirred under the sheets, then sleepily pushed herself into a sitting position. Her eyes were groggy with sleep when she looked up, her long golden-red mane tousled into a wiry mop. The agent could not have been more than ten years older than her, and he wasn't big, but Asuka looked so small by comparison, and exhausted. She didn't wear any pajamas, only a loose top and a pair of panties. Some days she couldn't even muster the strength to climb out of bed, let alone change out of her bedclothes.

She's hurt, Hikari thought with a hint of anger as she watched her friend and the man towering above her.
Can't he see that? She really shouldn't be going anywhere.

For the second time since opening the door, the agent did something she did not expect. Rather than talk down to Asuka as authority figures often did, he dropped to one knee so that she was the one looking down at him instead and removed his sunglasses. Hikari was a romantic at heart, and this simple gesture struck her powerfully. She knew then that these men weren't here to kidnap Asuka or force her into helping them. They'd come to ask for her help. Ask politely.

Somehow Hikari decided that Major Katsuragi might have something to do with that. It seemed like just the thing she would do.

After a brief conversation—again, Hikari couldn't hear what was being said, but she noticed Asuka nodding slowly as something was explained to her—the agent got up and slipped back through the door, closing it and replacing his sunglasses.

"I'll give her a minute to get dressed," he said. "Does she have an overnight bag? Any medication she needs to bring?"

Hikari shook her head. "No. And ... thank you."

The man nodded. "Don't mention it, Miss."

Asuka emerged almost exactly a whole minute later, an ordinary redheaded girl dressed in a pair of short denim shorts and a loose T-shirt. She looked like anything but one of the valiant defenders of humanity the media had made the Evangelion pilots out to be—without ever bothering to meet any of them. Her eyes were dull, and she moved slowly, almost as if sleepwalking. Her shoulders were slumped. To Hikari, she looked so exhausted. How were they expecting her to do anything like this?

"If you don't mind, Miss Soryu, we should get going," the agent said, firmly but not unpleasantly. "We have a timeline. Major Katsuragi is already expecting us."

Hearing the Major's name eased Hikari's concern. The Major deeply cared about the pilots, of that she had no doubt, so it was unlikely she'd risk their lives needlessly. Nodding to the agent, Hikari turned herself around and led the way downstairs.

"Take care of yourself," she told Asuka as the redhead put on her shoes by the front door. Beside her, the Section 2 agent did the same.

"I'll be fine," Asuka said bluntly when she was done, but Hikari wasn't convinced. She knew her friend would never willingly admit weakness,

no more than she would admit to being scared or needing anyone. That just wasn't Asuka. But Hikari also knew better.

And because she had the awful, uncomfortable feeling that Section 2 wouldn't have been sent to bring Asuka in without a very good cause, because she could feel a heavy weight in the pit of her stomach, and simply because she didn't want to let the moment pass her by without showing she cared, Hikari lunged forward and hugged her.

Asuka said nothing and did not return the gesture. Neither did she try to pull away. Hikari took that for acceptance and hugged her a little tighter. Even if she was unwilling to admit it, in Hikari's mind no one deserved this more than her. No one needed it more.

"We should go," the agent said after a moment. He was looking at them while they embraced, and Hikari thought she could see the curve of a smile on his face.

He understood.

Hikari nodded again and opened the door.

"Miss Horaki, you should listen to the alert advisory and take the necessary precautions," the agent said. His smile had already vanished, replaced with a grave expression.

"Follow all instructions. Things will not be safe in a few hours. Are you here by yourself?"

"My little sister is upstairs too," Hikari said. She frowned, a sudden empty sensation in her stomach. "Alert advisory? Is there an Angel coming? There weren't supposed to be any more. At least . . . that's what I heard."

"I take it you haven't seen the news." The agent sounded almost sad. "Do yourself a favor and don't. Take your sister to the closest shelter. I assume you've done this before."

“Yeah, I know how this works,” Hikari replied, sighing. Emergencies in Tokyo-3 were nothing new to its citizens. If anything, they’d once been part of everyday life. The sun rose. It rained almost every day in the summer. And alien monsters tried to blow you up. Normal. “Well, if it is an Angel, give them Hell for me, Asuka.”

Asuka looked away, her eyes somewhere on the floor, loose hair spilling over one shoulder. Hikari prayed she didn’t have to fight and feared what might happen if she did. Surely, NERV was not that crazy or desperate.

The agent stepped outside and made a gesture for Asuka to follow him, which the girl did silently with her head bowed. He walked the sullen redhead down the steps towards the driveway as Hikari looked on from the doorway. His partner held the car’s back door open for Asuka, and she climbed into the car without having ever even looked up. Hikari thought Asuka normally would have hated being treated like this, because she always took pride in being on her own and doing things for herself, but now it didn’t seem to matter. The fight was gone from her.

Please don’t let anything happen to her, Hikari thought. I’ll go to the shrine and bring an offering. I’ll volunteer for clean-up duty every week. She’s my friend. Please don’t let her die.

As Asuka’s escort closed the back door, the second agent climbed behind the wheel and started the engine. Hikari watched them as she struggled with an ominous feeling in her stomach. Soon, the car reversed, then executed a quick U-turn in the middle of the street and headed off towards the north, picking up speed as it went.

Hikari lingered by the door, gazing worriedly after the car even after it had disappeared from her sight. A moment later, she heard the sirens splitting the air like a chilling scream.

It was not a new sound, but ominous regardless, and one she never thought she'd hear again.

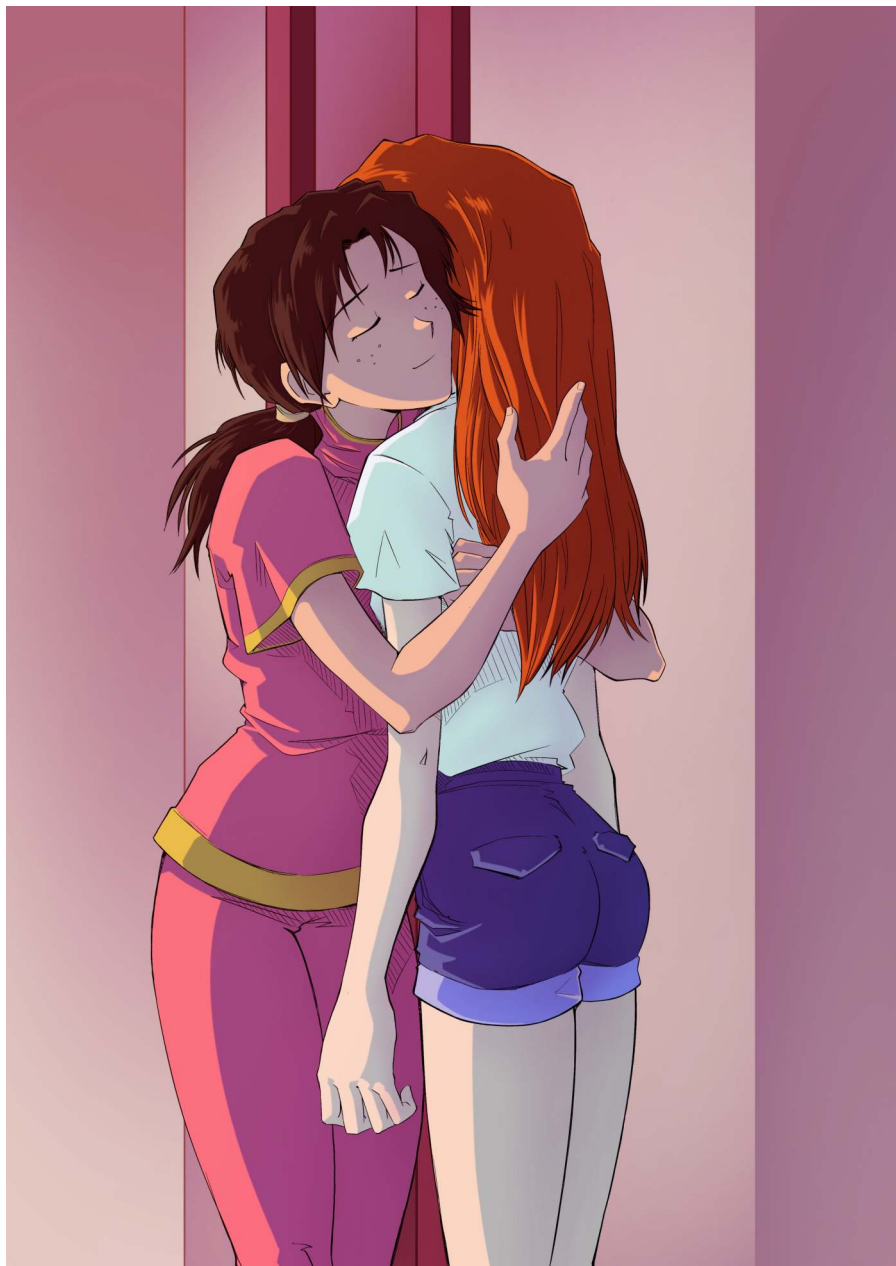
She should get dressed, Hikari decided. Once the alert went on and all the emergency broadcasts started, it wouldn't be long before the shelters opened. People would need help. And she needed to get her sister to safety as well.

If only it were that easy for someone to help Asuka and the others. If only she could do something to stop them from being hurt. She wished she could. She always did. But wishing would not make it a reality. The world was much too cruel and didn't always agree with the desires of teen girls, even one as proper, respectful and dutiful as Hikari Horaki.

The siren kept up its wail, then it was joined by a robotic female voice.

"Attention, attention. All citizens are advised to head for their respective shelters. Designated emergency routes have been enabled. This is a mandatory evacuation under the authority of the Tokyo-3 City Council. This is not a drill. Attention, attention. All citizens ..."

Hikari sighed. She stepped back and closed the door, hoping against hope that she hadn't just seen her best friend for the last time, and hurried upstairs to find her sister. Behind her, the wailing continued.





“The current situation in China has created a vortex of unwanted activity around NERV, to say nothing of the JSSDF,” SEELE 01 said from behind the anonymity afforded to him by the monolith marked “Sound Only.” “Needless to say, we have every reason to believe the actions of Gendo Ikari are to blame for this setback.”

“We should not have allowed him such leeway. The fact is that a wild beast is the most dangerous when trapped,” SEELE 02 said. “And Gendo Ikari is no less of a beast than most maniacs in history.”

“The only problem with such thinking is that half the time those beasts end up victorious,” SEELE 03 said. “Some of us know a few of them.”

Musashi Kluge had to laugh. He stood in the middle of the circle created by all 12 monoliths. The only light in the otherwise dark room was that generated by the bleak holographic stand-ins for people who could have been mere yards or thousands of miles away. It was like standing in a Twenty-First Century Stonehenge where men had supplanted gods as objects of worship.

And while he didn’t find the overcomplicated protocol of their meetings particularly bothersome, it was somewhat frustrating that they did not trust him enough to deliver their directives face-to-face. He wondered what they would say if he told them that even the electronic voice boxes they used to disguise their accents could only do so much. A skilled listener would be able to pick up their cadence and accents. Given that there were only a few people truly in a position to be part of such a secret organization, it would only be a matter of careful research to narrow some of them down.

But Kluge had no need to do that. He knew the head of this organization from the days of firebrand politics following the Second Impact and the ensuing cover-up. When lies held the world together in the wake of total catastrophe and men with iron for blood ensured the security and stability of those who could never know the truth. Lorenz Keel, at least, felt he could trust him. That was enough. How could it not be? He had faithfully kept the man's secrets and in return, it had been Keel who brought him out of the east and into Japan.

Through the years their relationship had only deepened, allowing Kluge to get away with things that were far beyond the scope of even a Department Chief. Scandalous things, but necessary. Even the politicians understood that, occasionally. It hardly mattered. Keel was always there, and oversight was a meaningless word when the people watching the watchmen knew and already consented to the methods of those being watched.

"We understand this is a troubling situation, but it is not a reason for panic," SEELE 10 said. "The UN must certainly be aware of that. They know very well what kind of man Ikari is. Chief Kluge, I believe you have information on that front?"

"Oh, they're in a panic," Kluge said. "I don't believe there is much room for reasoning at the moment. NERV has three Evangelions and the Angel is headed for Tokyo-3. The UN has already granted Ikari emergency powers and is ready to surrender more. The Prime Minister almost also flew into a rage. For all intents and purposes, Tokyo-3 will become an autonomous zone."

"Ikari must have known that this would happen," SEELE 12 said. "He did order the Chinese experiments, and they seized upon the opportunity despite the UN's objections."

“We have no proof.” Kluge shrugged. “You can thank your man Nakajima for that.” He gave the SEELE 02 monolith a pointed glance. “If you don’t mind me saying.”

“A single man’s failure cannot excuse your entire organization,” SEELE 02 replied. “Surely, if the Chinese received their directives from Ikari there must be evidence.”

“What if he didn’t?” SEELE 06 ventured. “The Evangelion is a piece of technology, and like any technology it can be copied. The Chinese have always been good at reverse engineering. Even if Ikari provided some assistance, it is entirely possible he did not light this fuse. I find it highly unlikely the Chinese Branch would allow him to destroy their capital with an experiment.”

“Ikari did not have to light the fuse, as you put it,” SEELE 07 said. “All he had to do was dangle a lure before the Chinese Branch that they could not refuse. Recklessness breeds carelessness. And this is the result. They wanted power, and someone handed them a loaded gun without them knowing how to use or control it. This is the result. An accident.”

It was not entirely impossible, Kluge was willing to admit. The Chinese government could hardly be blamed for looking after its own interests. In a world without any superpowers, whatever advantage a nation could gain over its rivals could be the difference between ruling and being ruled. Even the ban on nuclear weapons had done little to hamper their trafficking—governments had simply stopped doing so overtly and started working through proxies. And in some cases, like the Americans, made a total mockery of the treaties by finding creative loopholes.

Politicians seemed to think that just because they said something was illegal everyone else was bound to agree. They misunderstood the lack of opposition for acquiescence.

That simply wasn't the case; battling in the field of global politics was too expensive and time consuming when there were other methods available to people with the will and power to exert their influence. The Evangelion was no different.

In such a world, Gendo Ikari did not have to order anything. All he really had to do was nudge the Chinese in the right direction and let their greed for power do the rest. The Americans themselves had already lost an entire facility to the Evas with thousands of casualties, and their Unit-03 had turned out to be Angel itself. And if America couldn't make it work, what hope did China have?

Of course, even if that was the truth, it didn't really matter. They were not here looking for the truth. Let the philosophers worry about that. They were here looking for the future, and the road to that future was built with whatever materials were required. Even monstrous lies.

Like the Second Impact.

"The Chinese have gotten their due for helping Ikari," SEELE 01 pointed out. "We can only hope that this will deter other rogue governments from doing the same thing in the future. Now we can move in and fill the void."

"The recovery effort is not the committee's concern," SEELE 08 said briskly.

"No, what is of our concern is the fact that the UN was told that there were no more Angels in an effort to destroy NERV's bargaining power," SEELE 03 said. "This incident will harm our credibility in certain circles."

"Surely, it is what Ikari must have intended," SEELE 07 said. "To force his influence over ours."

“Indeed,” SEELE 02 began. “We are aware of his intentions, and he knows that we will not allow him to continue his plan in open defiance of our interests. However, although we know the final destination, we do not know the path he will take. This latest situation is irrefutable proof that he cannot be entirely predicted and is willing to do anything.”

“Mind you,” Kluge said, repeating himself on this issue. “We still have no actual evidence. Which doesn’t mean he isn’t responsible, only that we cannot pin this on him in the court of international opinion. If we can’t do that, it will be very difficult to change foreign policy in regards to NERV.”

No amount of reasoning was going to stop SEELE from blaming Ikari, he knew that, and he was almost certain himself that Ikari was directly responsible. But other people didn’t know him as well as they did. Other people would need proof. And that was exactly what they lacked.

*They should have let me blow Nakajima’s brains out.
The man is incompetent at best. A possible traitor at worst.*

“Ikari has sought to unsettle us in the past, by losing the Spear of Longinus and refusing access to the First Child, but we devised a second scenario,” SEELE 09 said. “He must also know this, so he concocted a new scenario of his own.”

“That is what this is all about,” SEELE 05 said.
“He is challenging us.”

Kluge nodded. “Be that as it may, it doesn’t change the fact that he played this one brilliantly. Had we had a more competent agent in place, perhaps—”

“We have already gone over this, Chief Kluge,” SEELE 07 cut him off, which surprised him. “It is permissible for you to disagree with the decisions of this council, but the matter has been settled before. Nakajima was the best tool available for the job precisely because he wasn’t obvious.”

“But it didn’t do us any good in the end,” Kluge retorted.

“I trust nothing untoward has happened to the agent,” SEELE 02 said. “He is already in place inside NERV, and we may have further need of him before this is done.”

“No,” Kluge couldn’t help the grin that came over his wrinkled face. “Of course not. He’s alive.”

He couldn’t really know that for certain, obviously, but as far as he was concerned Nakajima had indeed still been alive when he left him by the side of the road. He didn’t believe himself responsible should the younger man bleed out on the street as a result of his wound.

“I seem to recall you said something similar about Kaji Ryoji,” SEELE 04 said.

Kluge shrugged, struggling to contain a sharp smirk. For once he envied the anonymity of the monoliths. “Your memory is better than mine in that regard.”

“He was a valuable asset, but what is done is done. To every action there is a reaction. Ikari has acted, and now we must react,” SEELE 09 said, steering the conversation back to its original purpose. “We must deal with this so-called ‘Angel.’ This Samael. What an insult!”

“Man is not meant to create Angels, just as he’s not meant to create gods,” SEELE 01 added. “To do so is to defy God’s power.”

“We still don’t know the nature of this threat.” Kluge pushed Nakajima’s fate to the back of his mind and followed along. “As has been suggested, it is entirely possible this situation is simply the result of unforeseen consequences. All we can do for the time being is guess. Some of my people already suspect the Emerald Tablet was involved, but there is no evidence.”

“You suspect? This Angel was almost certainly created by the foolishness of man,” SEELE 05 said. “But it is a beast of destruction and does not follow the rules of man, and not even those of the Most High.”

“We know what it is,” SEELE 03 said. “It’s a spawn, the first of those which will be brought forth by the Tablet’s power. But it seeks not just destruction. We now know there was a reason Naoko Akagi abandoned that project so long ago.”

Or so they said, but Kluge wondered if it was the real truth. Had they known what the Emerald Table could do—assuming that it really was the Tablet that created this Angel—and still allowed Ikari access to it in a bid to call his bluff, then they were responsible for it too. It was also possible NERV had seen this coming and planned accordingly around it. Kluge was not a gambling man, but if he had been, he would bet on the latter.

Neither option troubled him much. He had long since come to understand that sacrificing pawns was often part of a winning strategy, which meant that a lack of scruples was almost mandatory. Cruel as it might be, that was the nature of his business. And if Ikari had made this Angel, he would now have to fight it with everything he had, even risking his own son, while SEELE could only watch and wait to pounce.

“Understanding is the key,” SEELE 02 said. “That is what fuels this fearful symmetry. And when it understands mankind,

it will seek the total annihilation of its humanity, much like the previous Angels. And it will seek the being responsible for the wretchedness of the human race: Lilith, not Adam.

Once Lilith is brought to divine justice . . .”

“The world will end,” SEELE 01 said.

Unless NERV is victorious, Kluge thought. And if it was then Ikari would be a hero in the eyes of a lot of very powerful people. On the other hand, if it failed everyone would be far too dead to care. Ikari had to win, and they had to hope that he did or face extinction themselves. Should SEELE interfere at this stage, they would essentially be committing suicide.

It was a brilliant move. Musashi Kluge could admit as much. Worthy of a man like Gendo Ikari. Of a true monster, willing to sacrifice everything for a goal. In another world, he might have found great pleasure in working with someone like that.



The sad look of apology in Misato’s dark eyes was, for Shinji, a validation of how deeply in trouble they were. She regarded the two pilots standing next to each other in front of her with the sort of motherly concern Shinji had all but come to expect, but he could tell it was very hard for her. As she sometimes did, and especially during dire situations, his guardian had actively sought them out, meeting them in the lockers instead of waiting for them to come to her, and began to fill them in.

It was worse than Shinji had imagined. He was still shaking his head, struggling to convince himself that this was a bad dream. The news broadcasts on the TV had been confusing and even misleading, a garbled stream of information

coming out just as soon as it was obtained. They simply didn't know much of what had happened and offered little beside horrifying images. But Misato did know.

So many people . . .

Next to him, Rei appeared calm as usual. Her surreal red eyes did not betray a single hint of emotion even now. He envied her coolness. Asuka was also present, sitting by herself on the opposite end of the bench that ran down the length of the room. She had her knees drawn up to her chest and her head buried behind them, close enough to be within earshot but still keeping her distance. All three pilots had changed into their form-fitting plugsuits.

"... so that's the way things are," Misato finished grimly. "The UN hasn't confirmed the full scope of the loss, but estimates have exceeded three quarters of a million deaths. They are most likely going to continue rising."

"A whole city?" Shinji said with disbelief and fear in his voice. "How are we supposed to stop something like that?"

"By stepping in its way and trying to kill it before it kills us. That's really all we can do," Misato said.

"But it's still an Eva!" Shinji protested. An old nightmare drifted into his mind, mixing with this new one.

Misato raised a hand. "Ritsuko says they were conducting some type of automation experiment, like a Dummy System, so apparently no pilot was involved. You're right to worry, but this isn't like last time. There isn't any more information of what the Chinese Branch was doing at the moment. I'm afraid you'll need to wait if you want to know more."

Shinji nodded. If there was no pilot at least they wouldn't need to hurt someone else by fighting.

That was the last thing he'd want. Satisfied with his reaction, Misato turned to Rei, who'd remained silent since entering the room.

"Rei?"

"Yes?" Unlike Shinji's voice, Rei's tone was soft and steady. But while she might sound like that, anyone looking at her would have been able to tell that she was not entirely recovered from her recent injuries. Her posture was slouched, and Shinji had noticed a slight limp in her gait when she walked. Nothing pronounced or even very noticeable, but he had been looking for that sort of thing.

She's in pain, Shinji thought, looking at the blue-haired girl with open concern. As far as he knew, she had never even been released from the hospital.

Rei would not complain, though. That was how these things always went with her. Shinji kept hoping she'd change at least a little in this regard and start looking after her own health, especially with what had happened to ... her previous self. But even now she didn't show any sign that she would. In a rather disturbing way, she didn't appear to be worried about dying. Perhaps that was what bothered Shinji the most.

Because he knew, no matter how unconcerned Rei Ayanami seemed, how healthy she might appear outwardly, or how desperate the situation was, she was still unfit for combat. If he had any authority, she would not be here at all. She should be in bed, recovering.

Misato seemed to know that as well, and Shinji was glad to see that she was certainly not like his father. She hesitated for a short moment, looking at Rei with eyes edged with remorse, then gathered the courage to say what she needed to say.

"You will take Unit-00 and intercept the target at an area southwest of the city. You will be the vanguard of the defense."

NO! Shinji's jaw dropped. His eyes went wide.

Misato carried on. "We have arranged the requisition of a new kind of weapon that should make it possible to penetrate the Angel's AT Field from a safe distance. The SSDF is transporting it as we speak. I know you haven't done the weapons test yet, but that's why we'll be using long-range engagement rules. Using this plasma rifle should be no different than firing the positron rifle or most of the other heavy weapons. Lieutenant Ibuki will give you more information on the site." She paused, taking a breath. "That's the gist of it. Try to destroy the target as fast as you can, and as far away from you as possible."

Shinji felt a heavy pressure clamp down on his chest as she spoke. Was he the only one who could see that Rei wasn't all right? Was he the only one that actually cared? His father and Ritsuko would never think of Rei as anything other than a tool to be used as they wished. But Misato was different. She should know better.

"I understand," Rei said, not voicing any of the concerns Shinji desperately wished she would. "Am I to board the Unit-00 inside Central Dogma and take it to its position?"

"That's a negative." Misato shook her head. "Unit-00 is already on its way to the engagement zone. You will follow by VTOL."

"When do I go?" Rei asked

Misato checked her watch. "In about an hour. Hopefully, everything will be set up by that time. I'm trying to get all the pieces together on the site as soon as possible so you can take the rifle for a test-drive."

"Test-drive?" Rei said, plainly confused at Misato's choice of words.

“Practice,” Misato clarified. “I want you to get some practice with the rifle. You’ve never ... well, you know.”

Rei nodded. “I understand.”

“M-Misato?” Shinji’s voice quivered as he moved forward. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer to his question but felt obligated to ask simply because Misato hadn’t mentioned it and it wasn’t fair that Rei would be placing herself in danger when there might be some way for him to help. No matter what, he couldn’t just sit back. “What about Unit-01?”

“I don’t intend to use it for combat if possible. It may have worked out against ... the previous Angels, but that was inside Central Dogma and inside the city where we could manage power. The countryside is a different matter. Portable electrical generators won’t survive battle for long, and we have no idea what will happen with the S2 engine if it becomes active. But I will need you to remain on standby in case ...” Misato trailed off, but Shinji knew what she was about to say.

“In case Rei gets killed, right?” Shinji finished for her, regret, anger and fear fixing up into a new indescribable emotion in his words. “Just like ... just like ...”

Ayanami.

He could not even talk about her. How did you speak of someone who was gone and yet still there? But even though he missed his Ayanami, the girl he had really grown close with, this one ... this Rei ... It wasn’t fair that she should be out there while he did nothing. Ayanami had already died once for his sake, protecting him. He did not want to let that happen again. Unit-01 could fight. He could fight.

Misato gave him a sorry look. “I don’t want anything to happen to any of you,” she said. “I never do. Every time one of you is out there,

I hold my breath. But we must prepare for the worst. Unit-01 will back up Unit-00, and Unit-02 will back up Unit-01.”

“No.” Shinji stepped forward again, gloved hands clenched into fists. “You can’t do this. You can’t send her out there just like that. She’ll get hurt.”

He looked towards Rei as if for support, but the girl just stared back at him, silent and unmoved. He knew that for her it was as simple as following orders. She would do what she was told. After all, it was what his father had made her for.

“I have to go,” Rei said after a while, her voice barely a whisper.

Shinji was suddenly lost. While he could resign himself to everyone treating Rei like she was disposable, actually hearing her doing the same to herself was too much. He didn’t think she had a death wish, but she seemingly had no instinct of self-preservation either. She would die if it was required of her. Again.

Rei did not know how to stand up for herself, nor that it was okay to refuse certain orders. Probably because nobody had ever explained that it was even a possibility. She stepped forward silently. Working on automatic, Shinji threw out an arm to bar her way, holding her back.

“Ikari?” Rei whispered.

“Don’t call me that. Don’t use my father’s name.”

For the first time, Rei seemed taken aback.
“I . . . then what should I call you?”

“Whatever you want, but not that.” He turned to Misato, pale blue eyes pleading. “You can’t let her do this. Not with an Angel. It’s too dangerous. Please, you can’t. Send me instead. I’ll fight. Isn’t that what you wanted before? The whole point of me piloting again?”

Rei waited. She did not try to move past him or tell him that it wasn't for him to decide. Like she always did, she stood there meekly and silently with a blank expression on her soft-featured face. Until Misato gently shook her head, her own face becoming expressionless. A face Shinji had seen many times before.

Misato was unlikely to willingly place any of them in danger without need, Shinji reminded himself. Not him, not Rei, not Asuka. She must have had her reasons, and they were probably good ones. But they just weren't good enough for Shinji to risk losing someone else he cared about.

"Misato, please. Don't let her fight. She'll get hurt. I'll do it."

"I'm sorry, Shinji," Misato said. She wasn't looking at either of them anymore, as if she were ashamed that she had to put them in this situation. "There is no other way. I wish there was."

"There is another option!" Shinji shouted. He was barely keeping his emotions in check now. Even so, his voice quivered like he was about to burst into tears from fear and frustration. "I will fight!"

There was a pause, and for a fleeting moment Shinji dared to hope Misato would listen, but then . . .

"Please don't make this harder than it already is," his guardian said, lifting her head. "It isn't about who fights. It's about who has the better chance of being successful." She locked her eyes with him and in the second their gazes met, Shinji thought he understood the reason—the real reason—why she was so reluctant to let him ride Unit-01 into combat. His heart sank.

"You're protecting me, aren't you?" he said bitterly.
"You just don't want ME to get hurt."

Misato said nothing, but her silence was all the proof he needed to convince himself that he was right. That this was really about him, not Rei.

“So what?” came a shrill voice from behind them.

Both Shinji and Misato turned. Rei didn’t seem to notice.

Asuka dragged herself to feet with a long sigh of exasperation. Shinji had almost forgotten she was in the room. He just wasn’t used to her being so quiet. Her sapphire blue gaze pierced him like a needle through his heart when she looked at him. A hot needle that burned.

He still didn’t know how to react to her presence. His mouth suddenly went dry. He felt almost compelled to say something, but what could that be? What could he possibly do to make up for the horrible way in which he had hurt her?

For making her cry.

Asuka was not the sort to shrink from a fight. As young and slender as she was, she had always been far fiercer than her size or age would indicate. But he could tell she really didn’t want to be here with them, and especially not with him. Since her arrival she hadn’t said anything to either Shinji or Rei, with whom she shared a side of the locker room, and mostly ignored Misato while she briefed them. She hadn’t even looked at Shinji.

But as Asuka pinned him with her eyes for the first time, he could see the anger that had become such a part of her personality return. And something else, too.

“So what?” the redheaded girl repeated. “You say that like you don’t know you’re her favorite.”

“A-Asuka . . .” No matter how much Shinji wanted to talk to her, the words became stuck in his throat,

which by now felt like dry sandpaper. His heart was suddenly heavier, yet beating faster. He was back in the kitchen for a moment, telling her he hated her and that she should die.

I'm the one who should die, Shinji thought. Maybe then everything will stop hurting.

Asuka stepped closer, the swaying motion of her hips accented by the way her red plugsuit clung to her like a second skin. She pushed past them without saying anything, squeezing her slender frame between Misato and Rei, and left the locker room in a swish of red.

She couldn't stand to be around him now, Shinji knew. And why should she after what he'd said to her? The sad fact was that the only thing that shocked him more than her sudden reticence was that she wasn't screaming her head off. The screaming would have been preferable, because at least then he would have known there was a chance that she'd be okay.

But somehow, the sullen, brooding silence she'd fallen into seemed as far from okay as a haughty and outgoing girl like Asuka could be. He felt awful for her, and he should. It was very much his fault.

He looked toward Misato with a lost look, hoping to find some comfort. There were so many things pulling at his heart—the Angel, Rei's mission, Asuka—and he didn't know what to do or what to say. He just wanted everything to be fixed.

Misato regarded him with tender brown eyes filled with regret. He knew then that she cared, even if she couldn't bring herself to show it at the moment.

"Shinji," she said, "I can't promise that nobody will get hurt. And if I did, then you shouldn't believe me. Because it would be a lie. What I can promise is that I will do my best to keep everyone safe."

He nodded glumly, although only because there was nothing else to do.

Misato cast a quick glance to where Asuka had disappeared beyond the doorway. "I'm worried about Asuka. I know I shouldn't ask you this, but can you look after her?"

Shinji gave her a stunned look that basically questioned her sanity.

"I know, I know." Misato raised her hands in self-defense. Then her voice softened again. "Listen, Shinji, there's a lot more to people than harsh words. But sometimes those words are like wounds, and they fester like wounds. And the more you let them fester, the more painful they become. You know, some married couples don't like going to bed while being mad at each other. It makes sense—what if something happens during the night and the last thing you say to someone you love is that you hate them? I can't even imagine how hard that would be."

I did tell Asuka that I hated her, Shinji thought miserably.

Misato couldn't have known that, but her words hit him hard. Maybe she did know. Maybe he was so pathetic that she'd figured it out on her own.

"If there's one thing I learned from Kaji, it's that you shouldn't always think you'll get a chance to make certain things right. Those chances may never come," Misato said. And she gave him the warmest, kindest smile anyone had ever given him. "You shouldn't let fear keep you from doing right by those you care about. Don't repeat my mistakes."

He nodded, feeling he ought to do at least that much to acknowledge her. Then he couldn't look at her anymore and turned to Rei.

"I will be fine," the blue-haired girl said before he could say anything, throwing him off momentarily. He was so predictable.

"I . . . I know," Shinji stuttered a reply, wondering whether he'd ever get a chance to see her again. Like Asuka, there were so many more things he wanted to share with Rei, although in a different way. "Just . . . just be careful anyway."

That he couldn't keep her from doing what she felt she had to do filled him with helpless guilt. Perhaps if she had a real choice, if she could have said no, maybe he wouldn't be opposed to this so badly. Someone like Ritsuko would likely point out that his acceptance or even agreement was not required. Misato was far more understanding so she wouldn't say something like that. Rei was indifferent so she wouldn't say anything at all. She would accept her fate in silence.

It was that silence, and the boundless heap of negative emotions it produced, which made Shinji feel like he should go.

He walked towards the door, but just as he was about to exit the locker room Misato stepped in front of him and put a hand on his right shoulder. "Shinji, don't think for a second I will not look after her like you do." She hugged him quickly. "Look after yourself, too. You deserve it."

She patted him on the back as she let him go. Shinji dipped his head in a nod, grateful for her kindness. He gave Rei one last look over his shoulder.

"I'll see you when you get back, Rei."

Rei Ayanami remembered not to say goodbye. "I will see you then, Shinji."

As he left the locker room, Shinji stopped to rub a forearm across his eyes just in case there were any tears and took a deep breath.

Once he was sure he had some emotional control again, he hurriedly turned down the hall towards the elevator that would take him to the main cage and Unit-01. He found Asuka already waiting there with a sour look on her pretty face.

Seeing her brought a familiar, awful heaviness into his chest. His first impulse was to go back the way he'd come, but his body wouldn't obey him, and he ended up standing behind her. Asuka ignored him.

The elevator arrived. The heavy mesh grid that served as the door slid open with a rackety noise. Asuka walked inside, her footsteps oddly loud on the metal, hollow even. Shinji hesitated again, but something inside of him forced him to move forward, recalling the words Misato had just spoken and her warning about not waiting for second chances.

Of course, he didn't want to leave things with Asuka like this. But what was he supposed to do? She hated him and he told her he hated her as well. She didn't know it wasn't true. He'd just been angry and hurt. He didn't hate her at all.

The small elevator began moving, rising up on its tracks with a loud metallic noise. Shinji did his best to stop himself from looking towards Asuka, fearing how she might react. The last time they'd been alone together was ... that night.

A hundred times over Shinji had wished that he could take it all back. That somehow, he could erase those words from his mind before his mouth could utter them. Before he could make her cry. Despite all the hardships, Shinji had never seen that side of her. Asuka had been totally broken, spending months in the hospital after the Fifteenth Angel ravaged her mind and becoming unable to pilot her Eva, but even then,

tears seemed as alien to her as humility. Through the pain and hurt and fear, she'd held them back. She never cried.

Until he made her.

The elevator stopped and the mesh grid opened again, allowing them into the main cage, a massive steel and concrete holding cell for their Eva units. Unit-02, its red armor gleaming in the light, loomed over them like a blood-soaked giant on the near wall, attached to metal rails which secured it to the steel plates reinforcing the cage behind it. Unit-01 waited on the far side, bolted down to its own rails.

After hours of frantic activity Unit-00 had been moved out, but the gantries and platforms remained bustling with technicians and support crews.

Asuka trundled out silently, walking by him as if he weren't there. Even in his current state of mind, Shinji could not help noticing how tight the red material of her plugsuit fit her slender frame, how alluring and visible it was. The garment was supposed to aid in their synchronisation and provide protection, but in her case, it also served to showcase every curve, every bump and crease of her body.

Guilt filled his chest. He knew he was disgusting for thinking of her that way. Asuka was more than just a body, and she deserved better. She certainly deserved better than him.

And she deserved more than just silence.

"Asuka . . ." Shinji hesitated as he spoke, his voice barely audible. It took all his courage merely to say her name.

The redhead stopped suddenly. Shinji moved out behind her, careful not to get too close. The last thing he wanted was to make her feel uncomfortable.

“Asuka?” he repeated, fumbling for words. “I . . . I . . .”

“What?” Asuka’s tone was bitter. She turned her head to look at him, but their gazes met only for a second before Shinji looked away. He couldn’t bear to see the hurt in Asuka’s deep blue eyes, and he didn’t want to see the anger.

He took a deep breath.

“Misato said . . . maybe we should . . . you know, before going into battle.” His voice began to tremble. He struggled to keep it as even as possible. He sounded so childish, like a bumbling first-year student attempting to approach their senior. “We should—”

“Should what?” Asuka interrupted, clearly growing annoyed. Her hands had clenched into fists, and when she turned her shoulders, Shinji thought she might hit him. “Are you done wasting time or do you actually plan to say something important?”

“We might die, Asuka.”

“And?” Asuka snapped, her voice rising to its usual shrill tone. Her eyes glared at him. “That means you’ll get your stupid wish if it ends up coming after me.”

Pouring salt on an open wound would have been less painful than hearing her say that.

Shinji fumbled for a reply, even though he knew he couldn’t comfort her any more than he could stop her from hating him. That was a sad and well-established fact of their relationship, one he could no longer deny. Whatever she thought of him, that was the truth. But still he wanted to tell her how sorry he was that he had hurt her so badly, and that he would never do it again. He didn’t want her to die; far from it, he wanted to see her smile and be happy. He hadn’t meant to hurt her. He was just angry. She had to know.

He didn't mean to make her cry.

But the words stuck in his throat, and it was agony. Asuka would shout at him, throwing back whatever he said. Shinji knew that as certainly as he knew she couldn't stand him being next to her in that elevator. The void between them had grown too great, and he did not have the courage to cross it and simply say he was sorry.

"I guess I shouldn't worry about that, though," Asuka went on. "I won't be fighting. I'm not even a backup. I'm just a piece of trash they put in the Eva because there is nothing else to put in it. I'm nothing compared to—"

"That's not true!" Shinji quickly said.

Her eyes narrowed, and she looked at him like he was something she might have scraped off her shoe.

"You don't understand. You never have. Don't talk to me anymore if all you can do is sound like an idiot. Go worry about your precious little doll. I know that's what you really want."

Asuka turned around and stormed towards the massive armored bulk of her Evangelion, climbing the steps leading to the uppermost loading platform set up around Unit-02. Shinji sighed heavily as he watched her go, and hoped with all his heart that those would not prove to be the last words they ever spoke to each other. He hoped he got to see her again.

When she reached the upper platform, Asuka was greeted by a technician carrying a clipboard in his hand and a scar on his face. They exchanged a few words, but Shinji couldn't hear them. Then, after a momentary discussion, Asuka brushed past him and went to sit on the edge of the platform facing her Eva, her legs dangling over the side. There were nearly a dozen other technicians on the platform with her, moving around equipment,

dragging large power cables, and readying computer terminals. None of them approached her.

Take care of yourself, Asuka, Shinji thought. *I'm sorry.*

Turning away from Unit-02 and its pilot, Shinji made his way to his own Eva. The metal steps rang loudly under his feet as he climbed to the platform above and found Shigeru Aoba at the top. He was also holding a clipboard.

“Good, you are here,” the long-haired operator said, one of the few crew members Shinji recognized on sight. “We should have everything ready for you in twenty minutes.”

Shinji gave him a vague nod then looked up at Unit-01. The access plate at the base of its skull lay open, revealing the circular loading jack into which the entry-plug would be inserted, a massive black hole wide enough to accommodate a public bus and rimmed with a shining steel collar.

His entry-plug hung from a crane overhead, waiting to be moved into position. It was a glossy white with “EVA 01” stenciled in black block letters. Next to it was Unit-02’s entry-plug, decorated by a pattern of zigzagging red, black and orange lines wrapping around its circumference. Asuka’s crew had taken to painting pink kill marks on the side for each angel she defeated. It had been a while since they had that honor.

Shinji glanced again at the platform across the cage and saw that Asuka had brought her legs up to her chest. She was staring at her Eva, her face frozen with a kind of zealous determination he knew he could never feel in himself. Everyone was doing their best to leave her alone.

“Did you have breakfast?” Aoba’s voice asked behind him.

Shinji shook his head absently, his attention still on Asuka. He hadn't had anything to eat since the previous night. Section 2 had barely even given him a chance to put his shoes on that morning before bringing him in.

"I'll make sure we get you some energy bars," Aoba said. "Can't fight on an empty stomach."

He would only fight if Rei was dead, Shinji grimly reminded himself. And Asuka would only fight if he was dead. The thought made him feel sick.

"I'm not hungry," he told Aoba.

The operator looked at him doubtfully but nodded rather than arguing with him. "Alright. I got you. Just let me know if you need anything. That's why I'm here."

Shinji didn't see a point. The things he wanted most nobody could give him—not Aoba with his clipboard, not Misato with her strategies and promises, not even himself. No matter how much he wished he could.

Dropping his gaze firmly onto the deck in case Asuka decided to look his way, the Third Child found a nice sturdy metal box in a corner, wedged between a computer terminal and a spool of electrical cable, and sat down to wait.





“They were behind schedule, but now everything seems to be in order,” Maya Ibuki finished her report on the video screen. She looked frazzled, her short brown hair a tousled mop, and there was no hiding the shadows under her eyes. She had probably not slept the previous night, like almost everyone else.

“How long before it’s ready?” Misato asked. She had expected delays. It was one of the reasons she had sent her own team to oversee the deployment.

“An hour,” Maya said. “Maybe two. But I’ve been assured it won’t be any longer than that.”

“I hope not. That’s already cutting it kinda close,” Misato said. Retrieving the coffee cup from her console, she brought it to her lips and took a sip. It tasted awful but at least it was hot, and she needed the caffeine. “Is Rei there yet?”

“Section 2 dropped her off a few minutes ago. I’ll give her a quick update on what the plans are, but I doubt there will be time for her to take some shots with the rifle. She’s going to have to learn as she goes.”

“Rei is good at that.” Misato wondered if she should just tell Maya to have Rei read the manual—if there was a manual. “Anything else?”

Maya shook her head on the screen. “Not at the moment. Everyone’s been very helpful so far. Even the government and military staff.”

Because they are scared out of their minds, Misato thought. However, given the way things were going,

she couldn't hope for much better. "Good luck then, Maya," she said. "And tell Rei I wish her luck too."

"Will do, Major." Maya saluted and turned off the connection. The screen went blank.

Misato slumped down on the nearest chair and slowly rubbed her forearm against her eyes. She felt exhausted. After nearly twelve hours of continuous and increasingly mounting tension, she had to admit the pressure was getting to her. But while she could not remember sleeping or eating since the crisis began, the emotional stress was proving much worse than the physical.

Briefing Shinji and seeing his reaction to her plan had left her drained. Just getting the words out and standing against the objection had been hard. Harder than even briefing the Commander. Misato had anticipated what he would say. How could she not when she knew what he was like? But actually hearing the quiver in his voice and seeing the look of grief on his face had destroyed whatever courage and certainty she had managed to muster. Somehow, she'd gotten through it.

Misato looked around her and studied the tense faces of everyone in the control room. Everyone was doing their duty, and she was proud of them for it. They knew what was at stake. They were the last and most capable defenders of humanity. Failure was not an option.

Shinji and Asuka must have been waiting in their Evas by now, Misato realized. She hoped that it would not come down to putting them in the line of battle. If they could be safe, then maybe that would validate her decision to send out Rei. To risk her life in exchange for those of her children. Otherwise ...

"Major Katsuragi?"

Misato turned her head toward the familiar voice.

“What is it, Hyuga?”

“The UN Army has reported that they have taken their positions as requested. They would like for us to submit a set of orders for them to follow,” the young operator said. “UN Command has instructed its military officers that they should accept all orders from NERV. I have a full set of operational orders for them that have already been approved by the Commander, but you are the tactical officer. I need your—”

“I approve,” Misato said.

“But I haven’t told you what they are.” Hyuga looked surprised. “Will you read the briefing?”

“I don’t care. I’m done with briefings for the moment. Besides, it’s not as if the UN will have a vital role in this. We just need to keep them busy and out of the way. They’re likely to be more of a bother to us than the Angel.”

Hyuga nodded. “I understand.”

Misato stood, suddenly unable to stay put, and walked over to the center of the huge deck, looking over the large holographic display which filled the front of the cavernous room with an extremely detailed three-dimensional topographical outline of the terrain. Half a dozen screens were laid out in front, each showing separate images. On the deck below the MAGI supercomputers hummed quietly, processing the terabytes of data required for the displays, their information transfer capabilities, and basically everything else.

Folding her arms across her chest, Misato took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. Then, after almost a full minute, she opened them again and turned to face the crew, her extended family. Men and women who would live and die by her decisions.

“All right, people,” she said, her voice loud enough to be heard throughout the huge cavern. “It’s about that time, isn’t it? Let’s batten down the hatches and get ready for action.” She glanced towards the female operator on her right. “Haruna, has the MAGI been able to get a lock on the Angel’s energy pattern?”

“No, ma’am,” Haruna answered, sitting at Maya’s old terminal. “The pattern has been continually changing from orange to blue and back. MAGI has decided to label the target as unidentifiable.”

“That’s just great,” Misato replied.
“What’s the ETA on our defense airspace?”

“Two hours, sixteen minutes,” Aoba said. He had only just returned from the main cage ten minutes earlier, but Misato was glad someone she trusted had seen Shinji and Asuka into their Evas. “The target will be entering Japanese territorial airspace within the next twenty minutes. It’s slowed down considerably.”

“Thank you. Hyuga, do we have an image?”

“Yes.” Hyuga pressed a button on a nearby console and the huge screen in front of the room changed from the topographical map of Tokyo-3 to the Angel’s image.

Misato recoiled in disgust as soon as her brain was able to process what her eyes were seeing. Unit-A was ugly, with a long snout and fat lips, and more bestial than any Eva she had ever seen. But the eyes ... The eyes looked almost human. And red. Had they been softer and kinder, they might have resembled Rei’s.

“Why are they still escorting it?” Misato asked, noticing the large crowd of aircraft in the picture. “The UN was supposed to pull back. Have they finally decided to switch sides?”

“No, luckily things are not that bad yet,” Hyuga said, and with a few key-presses pulled up a list of actions taken thus far against the Angel. “These are Russian fighters, mostly SU-27s, clearing a path for it over international waters. There isn’t much of a point in getting in front of something you can’t stop. At 9:23 the UN began a full-scale missile assault on the target. Here’s the video feed.”

A small square appeared on the lower left corner of the screen. On the bottom, the square read: USS H. M. JACKSON (SSBN 730). At first nothing could be seen, but then a mountain of white foam emerged from the sea like a white pillar materializing out of thin air.

The missile appeared suspended for a few seconds before the steel casing meant to protect it from the salt water was ejected and its solid fuel booster ignited in a thick jet of orange flame. The bright fiery column ascended into the blue morning sky and was soon followed by nearly a dozen others. They leveled off as the camera zoomed in. Misato saw their wings deploy.

“What are those?” she asked with a frown of curiosity. “Tomahawks?”

“Yes. Modified TLAMs by the looks of them. Satellite guided,” Hyuga answered, then he shook his head. “Couldn’t tell you what it might have taken to convince the Americans to give up the position of one of their boomers. A small African country, maybe.”

Sure enough, the submarine’s coordinates were now locked into the satellite as it was being tracked. Americans did not give up national secrets for free, and their missile submarines, especially the Ohio-class boats like this one, were at the top of that list. For them to actually agree to launch in support of a NERV operation likely meant they had been promised something worthwhile in return.

“Maybe they just don’t want to be left out of the party. It’s a shooting gallery out there, bring your own firepower,” Misato joked. Nobody laughed. “Any hits?”

The next image on the small square showed each and every one of the missiles smashing against the Angel’s AT Field, creating a heaving cloud of orange and yellow. At a thousand pounds per warhead, it was quite a display.

“All direct hits,” Hyuga said. He seemed impressed. “Amazing fire control, that’s for sure. But no visible damage to the target. After that, the Angel changed heading and entered Korean peninsular airspace. The Russians, fearing that the UN might try a nuclear assault, issued an ultimatum warning them not to fire anything over Korea and set up an escort with fighters out of Vladivostok. Technically, the Far East Umbrella does allow them to do that. The escorts have been instructed to pull out as soon as the Angel leaves the international airspace.” He checked the clock, “in about three minutes.”

Misato pressed her lips together and frowned as another number caught her eye. “How did it figure out it should change course?”

“Well, the original Unit-A had a full communication array,” Hyuga said. “Assuming the Angel could figure out how to use it and understand the signals, it wouldn’t take much to eavesdrop on the radio traffic out there. A better question would be how this Angel managed to deduct that it’d be safer over Korea instead of over the open ocean.”

“It’s a smart little bastard, isn’t it?” Misato uncrossed her arms and leaned forward into the safety rail to get a better look at the screens. “Its parents would be proud.”

“I don’t know about it being little, but it’s definitely smart,” Hyuga said. “Too smart.”

Misato nodded. "Encrypt all our comms. We may have to shift our defensive stance if it keeps changing heading. I don't want to run the risk of this thing actually understanding us."

The image on the screen changed to the map of Japan, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean and the land masses of the Russian Far East, the Eastern Chinese seaboard and Korea. A small triangle marked the Angel's position on the map.

"The UN is already aware of that. So is Maya," Hyuga said. "Unit-00 can be repositioned to the northwest if necessary, but military equipment doesn't travel as easily as ours. We'd be looking at another lengthy delay."

"I trust Maya. She won't reposition unless it means losing our intercept window," Misato said firmly. "What's the situation in Beijing?"

The screen changed again, and this time it showed the smoking ruins of something that had once been a city. Almost half the urban areas and their surroundings were reduced to a charred, black wasteland. Black smoke rose in thick clouds into the sky, covering everything with a blackened gloom. A deep crater was all that remained of NERV's Chinese Branch, surrounded by demolished buildings and twisted railway lines. The surveillance satellites and aircraft flew too high for the images to show any bodies.

Misato was thankful for that.

Hyuga looked away as he spoke. "The UN has diverted most of its land forces in the region to assist the Chinese government with recovery operations. The Russians have done so as well. However, the Red Army itself is reluctant to cross the border without explicit permission. They are simply taking care of some refugees and sending supplies for now. Because of the magnitude of the catastrophe, NERV can no longer rely on its China Branch,

nor can we depend on the Chinese government. No word yet as to what the final number of casualties is, but the UN and the Chinese government are being conservative on the estimates. Every self-respecting country in the world is sending or promising aid, but no doubt they too expect something in return.”

“Like always,” Misato said, her tone low and grim.
“It’s too bad that there is nothing we can do for those people. We have enough things to worry about already.”

“Speaking of which,” Aoba spoke up from behind her,
“the civilian authorities want to know what we plan to do about the innocent people in the city.”

Misato mused that one over for a few seconds,
but in the end, there was not a whole lot she could do.
She gave Aoba a determined look.

“Is the general alarm not enough?” Misato said.
“Taking care of those people is their responsibility.”

The people in the city should already know the drill.
The local government had originally been planning to begin evacuating the whole area surrounding the city, but they had lost so much time on the arrangements that the only place the people would be able to go were the underground shelters. With all the budget cuts, nobody had bothered keeping those maintained and there was no telling what sort of conditions they might be in. Regardless, they certainly would be safer than being outside.

“Major Katsuragi?”

Misato immediately recognized the voice of Ritsuko Akagi. She turned as the blonde woman walked across the deck towards her. Like everyone else, Ritsuko looked tired. Her lab coat was wrinkled, with the sleeves rolled up to reveal nicotine patches on her forearms. The lines under her eyes spoke of sleeplessness.

“What now, Ritsuko?” Misato said, narrowing her eyes suspiciously as she leaned back and slumped against the rail above the console. “More problems?”

“Not really,” the blonde doctor replied. “Shinji and Asuka are prepped and ready, and Unit-01 has been cleared for combat status. I thought you might want to know.”

“Thanks. Two less issues to worry about,” Misato said, trying not to sound as concerned as she felt. People expected her to be reliable, not emotional. “We’ll have a great show shortly. Would you care to stay? I could sure use your help up here.”

Ritsuko shrugged. “I suppose so. How’s the coffee?”

“Absolutely awful.”

“At least some things never change,” Ritsuko replied.

Misato forced a smile at her old college friend, but it was a meaningless gesture and Ritsuko ignored it. Tired as they already were, they both knew the worst was yet to come.



“Rei, can you hear me?”

Maya’s voice broke the grave-like silence that had settled over Unit-00’s entry plug for the last half-hour and reminded Rei just how badly her head hurt.

“Yes,” Rei managed, then bit back a whimper. She sat in the entry-plug’s command seat with her knees drawn up and her hands on the control sticks. The silence had been strangely comforting, allowing her to relax for a moment. But it did not take away her sickness. Nor did it make her like being inside the Eva.

The throbbing was getting worse, and the pain in her head was like a hammer being smashed against her skull. Her whole body ached, and had it not been for the present emergency she would doubtlessly be bedridden. Doctor Akagi and Commander Ikari were both aware of her condition, however. If they believed she could exercise Unit-00's combat capabilities with some effectiveness, then she saw no reason to question them. Rei seldom had an opinion in matters that did not require it. They wanted her here, so she was here.

And yet she wished she could be anywhere else. With Shinji, or perhaps in school. With the person and in the place which allowed her to feel like a human being rather than a tool. Instead, she had let them use her again, and now she was paying the price.

*If I had refused, they would have sent him instead.
I am not meant to have a future. But he is.*

The ride in the VTOL aircraft alone had been exhausting. By the end of it, Rei had been so weak and in so much pain they had to help her down while she tottered like an infant. The staging point was a wide clearing at the junction of a major highway and a railway line, surrounded by forests and hills that gave way in the immediate vicinity to towers of equipment, dozens of vehicles and hundreds of men and women. Further east, the road snaked up the side of a mountain like a thick gray ribbon. Tokyo-3 lay beyond it, hidden from view on the opposite slope.

Two dozen other NERV personnel had arrived at the engagement zone with her, ahead of their projected schedule. An army of vehicles, trucks and other specialized equipment was needed to assemble the rifle and to tend to the Evangelion itself, which had been transported on a train.

Unit-00 was in a sorry state; its armor was an amalgamation of blue and yellow-orange pieces thanks to additional armor components added at the last minute for extra protection. One of its arms had been cannibalized entirely from spares and part of the lower torso had been removed, making its waist above the hips seem thin and rather frail. Maya Ibuki had commented that simply getting it operational at all was an act of supreme technical skill. The last time Rei had been inside of it the activation test had quickly become an ordeal, but the Lieutenant promised they had, in her words, “worked out the kinks.”

The power rerouting was not completed in time to allow for an on-site test of Unit-00 or the weapon it was meant to use. Cables had been strewn hastily on the ground in order to provide electricity to all the equipment, and it seemed as though the JSSDF had assumed NERV would bring its own power source. An argument ensued between the staff of both organizations during which Rei retreated to the side of her Eva to retch what little she’d been able to eat that day, only vaguely aware that some of the soldiers were watching her.

By the time Maya had come for her she had been on the edge of fainting. The lieutenant placed her on a stretcher and gave her an IV to keep her from becoming dehydrated. It was really all she could do for now.

“I promise we’ll take proper care of you when this is all done,” Maya Ibuki had told her with a face that was grim yet also sad. It reminded Rei of Shinji in a way. “I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble.”

Rei had boarded her Eva roughly an hour later and stayed there ever since, waiting, listening to their communications for instructions, and hurting.

“Rei, can you hear me? How are you feeling?”

Maya’s voice came again, just as softly as it had before.

“Fine,” Rei gave her the only answer she knew to give whenever that question was asked. She suspected from the heavy pause that the lieutenant did not believe her.

“Thank you for doing this, Rei. I know it’s not easy, but we are out of options. Now listen, I’ll give you a quick briefing on this new weapon and how it works. Try to focus, please. This is important.” Maya’s words were followed by a pause, then, after a few seconds, the lieutenant began speaking as if delivering a lecture. “In general, plasma is an assembly of charged particles and fields that exhibit collective effects. Plasma masses carry electrical currents and generate strong magnetic fields as well. You probably know from school that it is the most common form of matter, comprising more than 99% of the visible universe.”

Rei listened in respectful silence. She had no more than a theoretical use for any of this type of information on a weapon she was about to use in combat for the first time. All she needed to know was where to find the trigger and how to aim the rifle. She expected the lieutenant would get to that eventually.

“Plasma is radically multiscale in two senses: first, most plasma systems involve electrodynamics coupling across a whole range of fields, and, second, plasma systems occur over most of the physically possible ranges in space, energy and density scales.”

Rei pulled gently on the control stick on her right. The high-density plasma rifle felt heavy in Unit-00’s arm. It was not a static weapon like the positron rifle, which was useful only when fired from a fixed position as if it were a sniper rifle.

Another significant difference was the fact that the plasma rifle required a great deal of power for its firing mechanism instead of depending on power for ammunition as the positron rifle did.

The Lieutenant was still talking. “Now, in inertial-confinement fusion, laser beams or ion beams energize the inside of a small cylindrical target. X-rays then rapidly heat the capsule causing its surface to blow off. The resulting force compresses the plasma fuel, usually hydrogen isotopes, raising temperatures to one hundred million degrees Celsius and densities to 20 times greater than lead. This ignites the plasma fuel and produces a fusion energy output many times the laser energy input, thus yielding extremely large energy gains.”

“That’s how the rifle works. It shoots a super-heated capsule of ultra-dense plasma causing a fusion reaction without any kind of radioactive residue. The technology has existed since before the Second Impact, but the JSSDF and the US Department of Defense have adapted it for use with the Eva as part of their joint development program. The only thing we’ve found to be troublesome is the targeting system, so most of the software that controls the rifle’s own targeting has been ditched. To compensate we have connected it to your Eva’s own computer.”

“I understand,” Rei said vaguely.

“In theory, each individual round should easily produce enough energy to penetrate the AT Field. In practice, well, we just don’t know. Unfortunately, this kind of output means that even if you miss, the entire area will be devastated by the explosion. All personnel will need to evacuate before the battle starts for safety. We’ll return when it’s over,” Maya said, hesitating only slightly. “Okay, that’s about it. Do you want to go ahead and do some targeting practice?”

Before Rei could reply another sound caught her attention. The blue-haired pilot immediately recognized it as an alarm siren, a long ominous wail echoing in the distance beyond the sloping hills of their mountain outpost—Tokyo-3's general alert warning. She had heard it a hundred times in her memory and in her dreams. Never inside an Eva.

Rei knew, at that moment, the battle was upon her. Her first, and maybe her last.

“Looks like I'll have to owe you that practice,” Maya said unnecessarily. “Prepare for a combat check-up.”

Rei turned her aching head towards the western sky, the direction she had been told the Angel would be coming, and wondered if she should be scared. Certainly a human being would feel frightened and nervous, but she was not.

She was calm and unafraid, and she wondered if it was another sign of her lack of humanity. *If I die, the pain will stop*, Rei thought. She grabbed her control sticks and pulled them towards her body.

Unit-00 stood.

* * *

Misato glared at the video feed with only detached interest. The UN Army tanks and anti-aircraft batteries, along with a wide range of surface-to-air missile positions and artillery emplacements, made neat lines sprawled across the west and northwest of the Japanese mainland. If the circumstances had been different, she might have felt impressed.

The general alarm had sounded for the Hakone-Nagano area, but not for the entire nation as Misato had expected.

While the UN units manned the forward positions, the JSSDF was still trying to have the critical area outside Tokyo-3's fortress perimeter evacuated after a last-minute decision by the Ministry of the Interior. Misato doubted it could be done in such little time, though she had to give credit to the civilian authorities for preventing a panic flight and imposing order. The shelters inside the city itself were filled up, as expected. The roads were mostly empty. Unit-00 was ready.

The Angel had reduced its speed and began descending, entering into what could be called a glide slope. Its broad wings were no longer flapping but stretched out like a giant bat.

Misato stood at the center of the command bridge, as she always did during these situations, with her arms crossed over her chest, tapping her fingers impatiently. The tension was rising in the room. She could clearly sense it, and so could everyone else. Meanwhile, Commander Ikari and Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki had taken their position on the observation deck, looking down on the bridge from their perch high above the proceedings.

"The Angel has entered the range of the SAM batteries along the Nizeka-Gousa defensive line," Hyuga announced. He turned slightly in his chair to face Misato. The seriousness of his expression made him seem older than he was. "They are going to engage."

Misato nodded.

"You really should call off this intervention," Ritsuko Akagi insisted, standing less than a foot away from Misato. Her eyes were fixed on the screen. "They are only wasting shells, missiles and money."

"Better their money than ours," Misato replied.

"It all comes from the same place," Ritsuko said grimly. "You know they'll just hand the bill over to us."

Misato shrugged. “Well, for what it’s worth, I suspect we won’t have any trouble paying it after today. In any case, it’s not exactly a waste. I gave the UN forces a slightly northern bearing for their attack. I think Mister Smarty-Pants Angel here will move a little southwards in response. Closer to Rei’s ideal intercept track.”

The first units to engage the target were the longer-range SAM launchers, followed by a barrage of MRLS fire. The visual image faded and blurred every time one of the missiles took off from its static platform. After a few seconds, the first reports began to filter in through NERV’s communication channels.

“Ground forces report direct hits on the AT Field but no damage,” Haruna said.

“The Air Force is engaging,” Aoba reported.
“We have an airborne visual.”

“Put it on the main screen,” Misato ordered.

Aoba hit a button on his console and the gigantic screen on the front of the multi-tiered bridge flickered and changed into an image of the Angel from one of the airborne gunships. And even though dozens of missiles smashed into and exploded against the AT Field, the Angel continued with its steady flight path.

“The Angel has come within artillery range,” Hyuga reported, just as the tanks, mostly Type 90s, opened fire along with the artillery pieces.

The sky became littered with black airbursts of flak from the combined assault of both air and ground forces arrayed against it, but the Angel simply ignored the chaos that went on around it, as if the whole situation had nothing to do with it. It flew unbothered through the black clouds of smoke, gliding like a giant seagull covered in glinting white armor.

“Looks like they are serious, don’t you think, Ritsuko?” Misato remarked, tilting her head towards the blonde doctor.

“A pointless exercise.” Ritsuko seemed annoyed at the question, but her expression betrayed a slight hint of amusement. “Boys and their toys,” she muttered.

“If they thought it was really pointless, do you think they still would have agreed to do this?” Misato asked. “Aside from my stated tactical intentions, I’m throwing them a bone. I’ll bet every one of those units is eager to justify its existence.”

“I didn’t know you were such a deep thinker,” Ritsuko said, and Misato was more than happy to accept the backhanded compliment. Coming from her, it actually meant something. “But I guess you are right. Militaries are led by bureaucrats, and bureaucrats don’t like to be pushed aside. It makes them seem irrelevant and being irrelevant leads to slashed budgets. Even doing something that is ineffective is better than doing nothing. However, you shouldn’t take advantage of that fact. We’re all on the same side.”

“That’s not really my problem. If they look helpless . . . Well, that just makes us look even better, doesn’t it? We have the only weapon that can save their butts, and it would be good for them to remember.”

“I see the Commander is rubbing off on you,” Ritsuko said.

I should slap her for that, Misato thought. “I’m risking the lives of people I care about, Ritsuko. If the military ends up embarrassing themselves or wasting ammo and money so I can give those people a marginally better shot, then I will do that every single day.”

The image from the gunship changed as the camera rotated, the picture now trailing a pair of bombers in the distance.

Only a few seconds later the camera placed the bombers in focus as the lens was adjusted. The incoming pair fired their huge payload of six N2 equipped missiles. Each and every one of the missiles smashed into the Angel's AT Field and engulfed a whole chunk of the sky in flames.

"Any damage?" Misato enquired.

"Not that we can tell," Haruna answered.

The camera rotated back to the Angel's image as it flew across the fiery sky, still undaunted by the air assaults. Then the Angel did something Misato didn't expect, or even think was possible for an object of such mass; it rolled over and began flying inverted.

Misato narrowed her eyes as another barrage of fire from the UN engulfed the sky. The Angel remained unhurt. Just as a third wave of fire closed in on it, the Angel put itself into a steep dive. It wasn't just flying around randomly trying to escape: it was planning ahead. A fighter pilot could not have done better.

"Altitude is dropping fast," Aoba reported.

"It appears that it has decided to land."

"Looks like it's angry," Ritsuko said.

"Wouldn't you be, Ritsuko?" Misato said, shaking her head.

"Those missiles will ruin anyone's day."

The Angel landed on its feet, exactly like a giant bird would. The earth cracked and trembled under the impact. As soon as it touched down, a rain of fire, shells, missiles and bombs came crashing down on it, followed soon by N2 bombs. The horizon exploded into a huge dome of light.

"Yeah, that was not part of the plan," Misato said, with a sigh.

"I guess you were right, about earlier. Boys and their toys."

Once the dust settled from the multitude of explosions, the Angel stood, with its head bowed and wings spread wide apart, in the middle of a huge crater. Its AT Field created octagons of reddish light around it, somewhat like huge transparent shields held aloft in mid-air. Around its sleek and armored frame, like a swarm of angry bugs, the UN gun ships and other aircraft prepared for another assault.

“Call them off, Major Katsuragi,” Ritsuko said.
“This is such an unnecessary spectacle.”

“What makes you think they’d pay attention to me right now? Their blood is up.”

The image zoomed in on the Angel as it raised its head. The dark eyes appeared to stare directly at the camera. There was a collective gasp from the people in the control room.

“I have a very high density energy concentration within the target!” Hyuga hurriedly informed, jumping up from his console. “It’s possible that it’s—”

The bright flash of light caught everybody by surprise and made the rest of the report rather redundant. A second sun burst into life from nothingness and expanded until everything within the Angel’s proximity was incinerated.

“EMP wave!” Aoba yelled from his console.

“We lost the feed from the Air Force,” Haruna said, her voice shaking slightly. “It . . . it destroyed them!” She rose from her chair. Her eyes filled with tears as she stared at Misato.
“Major, it destroyed them all!”

Misato shook her head, not too surprised at the girl’s sudden reaction. Haruna was among the few on the bridge who had never actually been in combat before.

“Calm down. The ground forces will be fine once the EMP clears out. Most of the aircraft are hardened as well. We should only expect casualties from within the blast radius.”

Haruna looked at her with unshielded fear for a moment, then nodded shakily and dropped back in her station. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“No problem,” Misato wasn’t about to chastise her for being scared. Everyone got scared some time. “Hyuga?”

“The Angel is moving again,” Hyuga reported.
“It’s resuming its course on foot it seems. Um, no wait. It’s two degrees further south.”

“The most expensive two degrees in history,” Ritsuko said sarcastically.

Misato ignored her.
She pushed away from the consoles and raised her voice.

“Alright, everyone, mind your stations. Hyuga, upgrade condition to red alert and make the final preparations. Unit-00 will engage the target as planned.” She looked up to the observation deck high on the huge cavern that was the bridge, from which the Commander and Sub-Commander had been watching the events unfolding below them. “Let’s send this tiger back to its Maker.”

* * *

“All safety locks have been removed,” the electronic voice announced. “Final block restriction has been disabled. Accelerator pressure is constant and stable.”

“Brain patterns are normal.”

“Pulse and heart rate are nominal. Synch Rate is holding at 39%.”

“LCL pressure is normal.”

“Cooling systems are on-line.”

Wincing, Rei pulled gently at the control sticks located on each side of her command seat and caused Unit-00 to respond by bringing up the plasma rifle. She had picked an adequate location to the northwest of the area Maya had indicated as the approved engagement zone. This approach lane, coded “Lima” by the planning team, consisted of a long narrow valley hemmed in by green mountains on both sides providing cover for her flanks, with a good line of sight for miles in front. This was not the original position suggested to her, but the latest report on the Angel’s current heading had prompted a tactical redeployment in order to find a more suitable shooting spot.

According to Maya, the Angel would have to come through the valley at some point, as it represented the shortest distance to its target. Rei was not sure that oversimplification would hold true. Nothing could force the Angel to do as they predicted it would. Saying this, however, and countering the lieutenant would have been both wasteful and disrespectful. Instead, she had requested that she be allowed to stay near the mouth of the valley so she could have the longest distance shot possible given the geography and reposition as needed. With luck, it would just be a matter of squeezing the trigger once.

“Okay, Rei,” Maya said through the communications channel. A small window in the LCL showed her worried face. “It’s all yours. We are evacuating the area. The target is approaching from the west. It’ll be in your sights in under a minute. Good luck.”

The first plasma fuel capsule loaded into the rifle with a quick movement of the action, leaving four others behind in the magazine chamber. With a gloved finger, Rei gripped the trigger and held on

to it loosely. She used a hand to press the butt of the rifle against the Evangelion's shoulder to steady the aim. Her breathing was quiet, her heart rate slow and steady. The nausea from before lingered in her stomach but she knew it had nothing to do with the battle.

Why am I so calm? Rei asked herself again.

I should be scared. Everyone is depending on me. Even Shinji.

The Angel came around from the west end of the valley, like Maya had said. The earth trembled with every step it took. Rei dropped the electronic sight on the target's head: a strange, long shape with a mouth full of teeth and red eyes. It moved slowly, almost as if it were sleepwalking. After only five seconds, the sight went from red to green as the computer gave her a shooting solution.

The Angel stopped and cocked its head as soon as it saw Unit-00. Perhaps it was surprised. It seemed to stare at the other Eva. At her. Rei realized she had seen eyes like those before.

"You have a shooting solution!" Maya yelled. "Fire!"

Rei squeezed the trigger.

A bright bolt of white light erupted from the muzzle brake at the tip of the barrel. The rifle recoiled with incredible force and almost made Rei lose her balance, thrusting the stock painfully against her shoulder. The bolt of glowing energy raced forward at a fraction of the speed of light, traveling in an arc as distance and gravity acted upon it. For a second, Rei thought that she had missed the target entirely, but the trajectory dipped at the last moment and the bolt smashed squarely into the Angel's AT Field, right in front of its head.

As soon as the bolt of plasma impacted the AT Field it lost its integrity and the energy of the hydrogen fuel contained within it exploded in a bright wall of light. There was no sound as an intense, man-made dawn seemed to devour the entire horizon anew. But it was too bright.

Rei shoved the targeting computer's visor aside in a rush and covered her eyes with a forearm to avoid being blinded. When the sound finally caught up with her, it was like being hit by a hurricane. Rei gritted her teeth and held her breath.

* * *

"Nice Shot!" Misato said, struggling to keep a smile from her face. "Hyuga, what is the status of the target?"

The operator checked his screen, then turned around to face the Major. "I can't tell. The EMP shockwave from the blast has knocked out most of our local sensors in the area."

"How long until we get them back?" Misato asked.

"Ten seconds at least."

"Visuals from the opposite ridgeline are coming back online!" Haruna informed as she pressed a button on her console. "Maximum magnification."

The bright light slowly faded away, and the image was brought into focus. Misato felt a cold hand tighten around her heart as soon as she realized what it was that she was seeing. An unsettling silence came over the bridge crew, snuffing out the cheers and euphoria that had followed Rei's shot as the horror of the image was displayed in its full resolution and enormity.

The winged Angel stood there, ghostly white amidst an alien sea of blackened destruction, a faint burn on its head. It looked towards the camera, red eyes narrowing, glaring directly at Misato.

It seemed angry.



“REI!”

Even before Rei could comprehend the full reality of what had just happened, the Angel sprung from its position and rushed towards her with uncanny speed. She reloaded the rifle, yanking back the bolt, but with no time to aim she simply pointed it and fired again. This time, the Angel moved away. It stopped in its tracks and leapt into the sky, as if it were a fleeing bird.

The plasma bolt exploded and once again released an incredible amount of energy, burning the already shattered landscape, nearly destroying Rei's visibility. The ground shook violently. Rei tried to follow the Angel's trajectory as it spun around in the air like some strange winged demon. But the light that had engulfed everything blinded her. She only saw a shadow.

“Rei, it's behind you!” Maya screamed through the comm.
“Look out!”

Rei turned around as fast as she could and tried to bring the rifle up. She never even saw the Angel coming. Something smashed into Unit-00's torso. Rei felt herself flying in the air and then everything rocked. She felt pain on her chest and soon realized that the Angel had driven Unit-00 to the ground. Only then did Rei see the Angel. It towered over her, pinning her to the ground with its weight and holding Unit-00's head against the terrain. She tried to kick it away, but it was too strong.

The Angel pounded its fist on Unit-00's head, making it bounce off the ground like a rubber ball, and grabbed the downed Eva by the neck.

Rei felt the bones on her nose and jaw complaining as the Angel drove Unit-00's head into the ground again.

She was gasping desperately for air. Her pain threshold long surpassed, she tasted bile rising into her mouth.

"Rei, get out of there!" Maya screamed.

Rei tried to defend herself by putting the rifle between the Angel and herself. She thought, in her pain and rising desperation, that if she could point it at the Angel there was simply no way it could withstand a blast at point-blank range. The Angel was faster and it was smart. Before she could fire, it smashed its fist into the rifle, destroying it.

This bought her time. As the rifle crumbled, Rei reached up and grabbed the Angel by the throat. She pushed it away with her arm and tightened her grip on the thing's neck. The pain in her head was unbearable. Rei could feel blood running down her forehead and across her left cheek, like tears, and she feared that she might black out. But somehow, she managed to make herself aware that she had to fight or die.

Every muscle in her arm was on fire. Everything hurt. Still, she held on to the thing's throat and hoped that if she could break its neck, she might have a chance. Rei clenched her teeth, in an effort to push away the pain and tried to focus all her remaining strength on squeezing the life out of the Angel.

The Angel reacted at once. Wrapping its hand around Unit-00's wrist and placing a knee under Unit-00's chin, it began to pull at the limb as it tried to strangle it. Rei cried out in severe pain. As the Evangelion's head was forced back, the Angel grabbed its shoulder and wrenched Unit-00's arm back.

Bones cracked sickeningly, followed by the sound of tearing flesh.

Rei felt tremendous agony as Unit-00's arm—her own arm for all neurological purposes—was separated from the shoulder. She screamed a blood-curdling shriek of pain beyond description and instinctively reached for her wounded shoulder. Muscle and ligaments gave way entirely under the power of the pull and the joint popped loose. Rei's arm went dead.

“Massive damage to Unit-00's right arm!” someone screamed through the comm. “Connections have been severed.”

Rei knew she couldn't defeat the Angel. All she could do was try to get away as the limb was completely severed from Unit-00. Breathing hard, she gritted her teeth and took a swing at the Angel's head with her good arm. Her enemy jerked back and caught her by the wrist. Rei almost had a breakdown at the realization that there was nothing stopping the Angel from ripping this arm to pieces too. That she would have to feel that again. It was too much.

“Rei, extend your AT Field and get the damned thing off of you,” Maya ordered.

The Angel did not pull at Unit-00's remaining arm like Rei had dreaded. Instead, it slammed it aside and wrapped its hands around her neck. Rei tried to use her AT Field to push the thing from her, but it engaged its own field to cancel hers. Then the Angel began smashing its head savagely against Unit-00's—against hers. Blood filled her mouth. Her head jerked back and hit the seat cushion. Something cracked along her jaw.

“REI!” More screaming in the communication system.

The Angel was just playing with her now, Rei realized in a haze of burning pain. She felt so tired and hurt so badly that she couldn't do anything to defend herself anymore. And she didn't even care to do so. She wanted the pain to stop.

Ikari ... Shinji ... I am sorry.

Then she recognized a stabbing pain at her neck, like acid being poured into her veins where the Angel's hand was holding Unit-00's throat. She remembered this kind of pain. She remembered feeling it, even though "she" never had before. Something inside of her screamed as the pain grew in intensity.

"We have contamination starting on Unit-00's main nervous system!" someone was yelling in her ear, though the words seemed to be fading. "The Angel is contaminating Unit-00!"

Blinding agony cracked down Rei's spine like an electric shock, white hot tendrils spreading over her tortured nerves. Rei arched her back almost spasmodically in an effort to simply pull away from the overwhelming pain and closed her eyes, hoping the darkness would somehow help her escape. But it was no use. Her body ... her mind ... everything ... was burning.

Rei screamed her throat ragged, a long, rending, shattering howl that echoed from the entry-plug's walls and returned to taunt what was left of her fading consciousness.

She was going to die. She knew.

But she hoped it would happen quickly. She hoped this would stop. The pain of living was too much. It had always been too much.

Then she heard the voice, whispered in some dark, shattering corner of her mind. Not human words, but words which she recognized with primal horror. Like the pain, she knew these as well.

You are different.



“Fancy thinking the beast was something you could hunt and kill.”

—William Golding

Genocide 0:06 / Samael

“Hold it steady and pour the water in the bag. Not too much,” Hikari said. She watched as her little sister obeyed, holding up the water bottle and tipping it so a small quantity would spill down on the green heater bag. “Okay, that’s enough. Give me the food.”

“Just the one?” Nozomi asked, her large brown eyes glancing at Hikari curiously. “Won’t you eat?”

“I’m not hungry,” Hikari said, gesturing impatiently with her free hand. “The food, please. This will get hot.”

Nozomi placed the bottle down on the bench, picked up the small sealed MRE pouch from the kit and handed it over. By then, the heater bag had begun to warm up in Hikari’s hands, producing wisps of steam. Moving quickly, Hikari took the pouch and carefully inserted it into the bag. When that was done, she rolled the top of the bag over on itself, closing it tightly and containing the heat. She gave it a good shake and set it next to the bottle.

“It’ll be a few minutes,” she told her sister. “Get the wipes. Make sure your hands are clean.”

“I know,” Nozomi grumbled, already reaching for the MRE kit and retrieving a pair of small sealed packets. “I’ve done this before. I’m not a baby.”

“Of course, I know,” Hikari said, but she couldn’t hold back the melancholic tone in her voice. Nozomi knew what to do. She, like Hikari and everyone around them in the shelter, had done it dozens of times by now.

Well, not everyone, Hikari thought, lifting her head and looking again towards the corner. A lone girl had been sitting there with her knees up and her head low for the better part of an hour. Her hair was bound rather messily into a thick brown ponytail as if she’d done it in a hurry. Her eyes were rimmed with red and the streaks on her swollen pink cheeks betrayed the fact that she’d been crying. Hikari had felt annoyed by that, until she remembered the reason.

Keiko Nagara had come into the shelter along with the rest of their class—during school days, daytime shelter locations were normally assigned by school instead of residential addresses—but unlike the others who’d at least tried to put on a brave front, Keiko was plainly terrified and didn’t care to hide it.

Under normal circumstances the tears might have resulted in some sympathy. With things the way they were, however, no one had the patience to deal with her. Every person in the shelter, mostly students with a few teachers sprinkled among them, knew that an Angel attack was the closest thing to an act of a God they could ever experience. That their friends and family, and even themselves could die at any moment. Yet they weren’t crying. Keiko was the only one.

Because she was also the only one who’d never been through this before.

In the five months or so since she joined their class, there had not been a declared emergency. Some of the news media had even announced the attacks were over for good. Hikari and the others had been through plenty,

and endured the pain and grief which resulted from living in a city designed to combat an unknown alien force. They had grown used to it, as much as such a thing was even really possible.

Hikari imagined this was what it must have been like living in a hurricane zone. There was still danger, sure, but one's perception of it became different. For Keiko, though, it was all new. And all frightening.

A sudden feeling of guilt made Hikari's chest feel heavy. *I didn't cry the first time*, she recalled, *but others in this same room did, and now they shun her*. She cast a glance towards Miho, sitting on one of the benches nearby, her long black hair tied up in a bun as she looked down on a makeup compact and touched up her lips with some lipstick.

Tall and slender, Miho was the only girl in their class who might stand up to Asuka for looks, and not in the same way. Miho was more what could be called a "traditional" Japanese beauty, always as perfect as a Kabuki doll and probably able to perform every step in a tea ceremony flawlessly. Meanwhile, Asuka was the foreign "princess" type, wild, exotic, loud, very un-Japanese, and so attractive boys made lines in the hall to stuff love letters into her locker. Predictably, they despised each other.

As Asuka went off risking her life to defend them, the other girls naturally gathered around Miho. Two sat on either side of her, chattering away, even smiling. A third stood in front of her, cell phone in hand. Hikari knew them all.

The two girls had not been there for the first attack, the one where Toji's sister had been hurt, but Miho was. Hikari could well remember the scene she'd made, crying in terror as the shelter shook, pulling at her hair so much Hikari had to stop her from tearing it out. Calling it hysterical would be an understatement.

One of the other two girls, sitting on Miho's right, had been almost the same during the second attack a few weeks later. The one on the left had just spent the whole time muttering.

It was also during that second attack that Toji and Kensuke had ended up inside Unit-01's entry-plug—and when they all finally discovered the awful and brutal toll piloting an Evangelion took on its pilot. Worrying about Rei and Shinji had been bad enough back then, but once Asuka arrived . . . How could someone carry so much pain inside them and still fight? And she had cried, too. Many times.

If Asuka could be strong and brave yet still cry, then why couldn't Keiko? They were only girls, after all.

Hikari turned to her sister. "Look after the food," she said. "Don't stick your hand in there if it's too hot."

Nozomi frowned at her despondently. "I'm not stupid."

Hikari patted her on the head. "Good. That means Father's not raising any dummies." She flashed a weak smile and got up. "I'll be back soon. Just gotta check on something."

Nozomi shrugged. "Hmm, sure, I guess."

Hikari moved down the bench, until she reached Kensuke. Like Keiko, he was sitting alone, although in his case it was by choice. He had a laptop open in his lap, his eyes moving rapidly across the screen. His camcorder was on the floor between his feet next to a large backpack. On his right side, he had a brown box marked with Western characters Hikari couldn't read, but she recognized the eagle and shield of the United States. Inside the box there were still a dozen packs wrapped with green bags and a few empty water bottles.

The shelters normally provided stored rations and running water, if they were lucky. However, the rations were atrocious and the water sometimes came out brown, when it came out at all. Even if it didn't, nobody liked drinking it. Kensuke Aida had long made a habit of bringing his own provisions, with a few to spare in case it was a long "deployment" as he called it. At first, other students had mocked him for that, saying it was stupid and nerdy. Most had changed their tune after they had a taste of the rations. MREs were by far the better choice, and they could be heated. Hot food did a lot to keep fear at bay.

"Hey," Hikari said as she approached. "I need another one."

Kensuke raised his eyes from the screen.

"I thought you weren't hungry," he said casually.

"It's not for me, it's for ..." Hikari gestured towards Keiko with her chin. "How much?"

He snorted. "As if I would charge you, of all people, Class Rep." Closing the laptop, he set it aside and pulled up the box, holding it for Hikari. "Have your pick. I think there's some good ones still left in there. Do you need some water tablets? I'm out of bottles."

"No, thank you." Hikari leaned in and quickly began searching through the remaining packs, unable to read them. "Umm ... what would be good for someone who's never had these before?"

Kensuke looked down, moved a few of the packs around and finally selected one. "Here, try beef stew. It wouldn't be too weird."

It's ALL too weird, Hikari thought. She kept that to herself and accepted the pack. "Thank you," she repeated. Then she nodded to the laptop. "Anything?"

"Looks like Ayanami is going in first," Kensuke said grimly. He understood the significance of that statement.

“Well, Unit-00 was spotted being moved to the west of the city. So, I assume it’s Ayanami.”

Something cold touched Hikari’s stomach.

“Just Ayanami? Why not send all three?”

Kensuke shrugged. “No way to know for sure. Everything got blown up last time, so perhaps they can only deploy them one at a time now. It’s not ideal, but there must be a reason.”

“I hope it all goes well,” Hikari thanked him for a third time then headed back to Nozomi. By now, her younger sister had opened her steamy bag and was carefully reaching inside, her tongue sticking out between her lips, a look of concentration on her face.

“Need help?”

Nozomi shook her head firmly. Leaving her to her food, Hikari took the open water bottle and approached Keiko Nagara, sitting beside the tear-faced brunette in her lonely corner. Keiko shrank back, looking surprised that anyone would want to be near her.

“This is for you,” Hikari said, placing the water bottle on the floor and pulling open the top of the green bag. She slid the content out and retrieved the pouch with the food. “We may be here for a while and you shouldn’t go too long without eating.”

“A ... while?” Keiko croaked, her voice low and scratchy. Even though she wasn’t crying anymore, her eyes shook and it was clear she wanted to. “H-How long does it usually take?”

“There’s no way to really know,” Hikari said honestly. “However long it takes for them to kill the Angel.”

“A-Asuka and Shinji, right?” Reaching up her hand, Keiko wiped it over her eyes. “My guardian ... she should be down there too. Somewhere.”

Hikari was surprised. "She works for NERV?"

Keiko nodded.

"In that case, she will protect us as well," Hikari said, as she began the process of preparing the MRE, opening the bag up, pouring water, waiting a few seconds, then stuffing the food pouch inside. "That's what NERV does. They protect people."

"I've ... I never ..." Keiko started shaking her head. "I thought there weren't any more Angels. I didn't think I would have to do this. I'm scared. What happens if they can't kill the Angel?"

"Then we die, I imagine."

Only after she'd spoken the words did Hikari realize they were probably not the right thing to say. Keiko's face crumpled like an old piece of paper. She bit her lip, her whole body shaking with the effort to hold back her weeping.

"Sorry," Hikari said. And she meant it. "I don't like lying to people, but sometimes honesty can be cruel. I don't know for sure what happens if NERV fails. I think it's clear that it wouldn't be good."

"I don't want to die," Keiko said tearfully.

"You won't," Hikari replied.

Then, as if to prove how wrong she could be, a distant booming noise echoed through the shelter, shaking the walls and ceiling like a small earthquake. This produced a sudden gasp from the assembled crowd. A few moments later, a second boom brought wails and screams, along with cracked walls as the ground trembled beneath them. After that, Keiko was not the only one crying.

Hikari closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She imagined Asuka, with her red hair and powerful, gorgeous smile,

Shinji with his sad eyes and Rei with her hair the color of the sky on a bright sunny day. And she imagined Toji with that dumb, cocky grin of his.

Someone dropped in beside her and hugged her. She knew without looking that it was her sister, her small arms and tiny hands grabbing on to her.

Then the boom came again, louder, clearer, and stronger. The whole world seemed to crack. Keiko screamed, along with a dozen other people. Hikari grabbed her sister and held her tight.

*I don't want to die, either, she thought.
But Shinji and the others will protect us. They always have.
For now, I need to do my part. Being afraid won't help anyone.*

Opening her eyes again, Hikari saw that some of the students had crawled under the benches. A few had stood up but didn't go anywhere, probably because there simply was nowhere to go once the shelter doors closed. They looked around with confusion etched on their faces. Kensuke was still on his laptop while Miho brushed some dust off her shoulders, doing her best to seem untroubled. Her stiff motions and pursed lips betrayed her real emotions.

And next to Hikari, Keiko had turned pale from fear. She was clutching herself tightly and rocking nervously back and forth, too afraid to even continue with her crying. Hikari turned her head and patted her sister on the back.

"It's alright," she said in a calm voice.
"Go get your food and bring it over."

"H-Hikari ..." Nozomi whimpered.

"Do as you're told," Hikari said firmly, patting her sister more gently to make up for it. "Please. You need to be a good girl right now. And don't burn yourself. That would be very bad."





This is bad.

Misato Katsuragi went cold with horror as the column of light rose across the already devastated landscape and consumed everything she could see in a blazing armageddon. Shimmering, shifting hues of intense red, white and orange filled the control room.

Less than three seconds before, Hyuga had reported a high-density energy build-up within the Angel's core similar to the one which it had used to drive the UN Air Force from the sky. They had all known what that meant by then, but there was little time to issue orders, let alone attempt to issue orders. Now it was too late.

"Maya?" Misato asked, almost absent-mindedly. As the light column faded, every screen and monitor in the control room with an outside feed suddenly vanished into hissing static. The main display switched into an overhead tactical view. "Maya, can you hear me?"

"Major . . ." It was Hyuga who called up to Misato first, turning in his chair, directly facing her. His expression was grim, and spoke louder than any report ever could. "We have lost the connection. Probably due to an EMP from the explosion."

"What about Rei?" Misato asked him, turning in his direction from where she stood on the main deck. It took some effort keeping her tone steady.

Getting emotional won't help anyone right now, the dark-haired woman thought. Focus. You have a job you need to do.

"It's impossible to tell," Hyuga replied.

“We ... we can’t get any readings on the pilot at all,” Haruna added. Her eyes were bristling with tears.
“All the biometric data streams have flatlined.”

That was bad, Misato considered, but perhaps not completely disastrous. In cases such as this, a general flatline across all inputs most likely meant there was no signal coming through, instead of ... the other far more serious alternative.

“What is Unit-00’s status?”

Hyuga swiveled away from her, checked his console, then turned back and shook his head. “Unknown. We can’t get anything on any of the frequencies. They’re either not there, or otherwise disabled.”

Misato nodded grimly. She was aware that the short distance made surviving the Angel’s blast extremely unlikely for Unit-00. The Evangelion’s AT Field ought to keep Rei safe—at least for a while. And Maya and her staff had evacuated the area immediately before the battle started. Everyone could still be okay. No reason to panic.

“The electromagnetic interference is gone,” Aoba reported after a long silent moment. “Visuals are coming back up.”

All screens on the bridge began flickering to life either one by one or in clusters. The main display was last, showing the ghastly image of the battle zone in clear digital horror. Smoke covered the landscape, billowing in thick brown and gray clouds rising from the earth like grasping fingers. The trees were gone, uprooted and tossed around like burnt matchsticks; roads, buildings, lamp posts, everything shattered. Amidst the destruction, the Angel stood undamaged at the bottom of an enormous crater, framed by a bright red HUD marker, its wings spread wide apart, armor dull and covered in dust.

It was still holding Unit-00 in its hands ... what was left of it.

“No!” Haruna whispered, her voice high with fear. She quickly covered her mouth with both hands and looked like she was about to cry. Aoba glanced over with a sad expression on his face.

Every single person in the room, with the exception of Gendo Ikari, stared in horror. Even Ritsuko, cold and generally considered to be heartless, stared, visibly shaken by what she was seeing. Misato was horrified. One of her hands found its way over her mouth as her eyes went wide.

Unit-00 was nothing more than a burnt carcass. Most of its armor was missing or burned through, its flesh charred black and peeling off in parts. As the Angel stepped through the dust, it folded its wings and released Unit-00, which simply fell to the ground like a discarded toy. The once-mighty Evangelion was now a ragged mess, but it wasn't the Evangelion itself that worried Misato.

Quiet prayers, whispering and gasping filled the silence.

Then a boy's voice echoed from the speakers.

“Rei!” Shinji's frantic cry broke through the silence. “Rei ... is she ... is she all right? Misato? Is she ... is she all right?” As he spoke, the words trembled, and his tone rose higher and more urgent. More desperate.

Misato cocked her head, as if snapping from a trance. A single question appeared on her mind. “Is he watching this in Unit-01?” she shouted, rushing towards Aoba and leaning over his console. “Damn it, is he watching this?”

“I ... think he is,” Aoba said, after a moment of hesitation. He looked up at Misato. “I guess no one thought to cut him out of the video feed. It's a tactical channel so he's not blocked by default.”

“Terminate his video link,” Misato ordered. “Now.”

But Shinji had already seen enough. As much as Misato wanted to protect him, there was no hiding the truth.

“Misato . . . Rei, is she alright?” Shinji whimpered.

Unlike the video feed, the pilot’s communication came from a public channel—everyone on the bridge could hear him.

“Misato, answer me. Is she alright? Please.”

A cluster of worried faces turned towards Misato.

Not one of them envied her, she could tell.

But they all knew what she did—she couldn’t lie to Shinji.

They would support her, regardless of the decision she made.

Dammit, she thought, her head sinking.

Why do I always have to break his heart?

“Shinji, I . . . don’t know,” Misato began, choking on her words.

She didn’t know what else to say. She searched in vain for something that would explain what had just happened and reassure Shinji that everything would be fine. Even if she didn’t believe it would. But before she could say anything else, Hyuga broke in.

“Major . . .”

Secretly, Misato was thankful for the reprieve. She tried gathering her thoughts and forcing her emotions down. She had to focus.

“The target is on the move again,” the bespectacled operator reported with clear alarm. “It is within the Geo-Front’s outer grid.”

“Tell me, Misato!” Shinji insisted, weeping openly now.

He had lost it. “I-is she alright? Where is she? Can you talk to her? Please . . . please. Tell me. Why did you have to send her?”

“Shinji . . . I . . . had no choice.”

“WHY?”

His cry, however, was drowned out by his father's stern voice echoing from the observation deck. "Enough of this nonsense, Major Katsuragi. Leave the sentimentalities for when this is over. You still have a job to do. So does the pilot of Unit-01."

Misato looked up at him, feeling a kind of hatred she had seldom felt since her own father died. "But sir, Rei is—"

"You can't help her now, Major," Ikari cut her off. "Deploy Unit-01 inside the Geo-Front. There is no point in sending it out there when we know where the Angel's headed."

"Misato?" Shinji's voice echoed again over the bridge.

Although a part of Misato fully understood that Gendo Ikari was right, she could not help but resent him. He could at least fake concern, especially knowing that his son was listening to him.

"Your father's right," Misato said, words she felt she would regret for the rest of her life. "We can't help her from here." She turned to Hyuga. "Prepare Unit-01 for sortie through Route 7. I want a full rescue and recovery team out there checking on Unit-00 and Rei ASAP. And get a hold of Maya."

"Misato," Shinji wept. "I can't ... I can't ..."

Misato sighed, though she understood. "Aoba, can you open a video link to him? Privately?"

The long-haired operator nodded. A small screen on the console nearby flickered, displaying the image of a young boy. His cheeks were flushed a deep red and streaked by tears. His eyes were lost, sad, but once he noticed the video link had opened in his LCL matrix he started wiping away his tears with the back of his hands.

Misato placed each of her hands on either side of the screen and leaned over it, letting him see every detail on her face.

“Shinji, please listen to me,” she said as warmly as she could. “I know it’s hard. Rei once told you that if you refused to fight you’d already lost everything, didn’t she? But you haven’t lost everything. All of us, everyone here—you have to protect us. You are the only one who can. It’s not fair to put that on you, but it’s true.”

“Mi-Misato . . .” Shinji was still wiping away his tears, but she could tell from his expression that he was listening.

“I know it’s hard,” she said. “I know it hurts. But please. I’ll be sending a team to bring Rei back. There’s no indication the entry-plug is breached. That means . . . it’s not the worst.”

“Misato . . .”

“Please, Shinji. I need you.” Misato cringed even as she said those words. It was a cheap shot, manipulating him and his sense of self-worth to get him to do what she needed him to. She felt like a whore—like she was back in his bedroom, vaguely offering her body to him because she could think of no other way to comfort him. She was using him. Always using him.

Misato hated herself for it, but at least she would have time to say she was sorry later. And it wasn’t a lie. She did truly need him. They all did.

If he refused, they would die. And the world with them. Life seldom offered such certainty.



Shinji could not hold back the tears.

There had been a time, many months ago, when he found it impossible to cry after Ayanami died while protecting him. He'd been so numb by then that he couldn't even manage a few moments to indulge his sinking emotions and gain the brief release that came with tears. Now it seemed like the most natural thing. He could do it freely, without feeling that he was somehow obligated to.

It wasn't that he cared less about this girl than the one she'd been before. He cared quite a lot. But it was just a different kind of grief. Different even than what he felt towards Asuka or Misato. Like the difference between grief for a friend and a family member. He couldn't claim that he understood very well, but it was there.

He was sitting inside the quiet, comforting warmth of his Unit-01, like he had countless times. Until a few minutes ago, he'd been completely oblivious to the battle he knew was raging above. Then he thought to check the video feed for an update. The holographic screen had jumped to life in front of him and he had seen the dreadful image of Unit-00's devastated form in the hands of the Angel.

His heart had stopped. It felt as though his chest had become as empty as the deepest corner of outer space. And even before he realized it, he had started to cry.

Then Misato came up on his screen, and ... talked to him. It seemed like such a little thing, but it wasn't the sort of condescending talk that took place between a grown-up and a crying child. She talked to him like she cared about his fears and feelings.

Like he imagined his mother would.

But even though it made him feel better, it wasn't enough. He knew, through painful experience, that the real world never conformed itself to soothing words. Despite whatever Misato might say, there was still the very likely possibility that Rei was ...

"Dammit!" Shinji smashed his fist against the nearest thing he could find, which happened to be the main console between his legs. The gesture was not one of anger—he did not know what to be angry at—but rather an expression of the inner void he felt. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!"

Hopelessness, guilt, loss—all these things stirred within him. Along with something else now, another powerful feeling which also began to take hold, sparked into life by Misato's words.

She needed him. *She*—not NERV, not the world, not anyone else. She. Misato Katsuragi. The woman who had welcomed him into her home without knowing anything about him; the woman, who despite everything, made him feel as though his life was worth something, who in the darkest of times had offered him a hand to hold.

And she needed him.

Shinji was not, and never had been, the sort of person that believed in epiphanies. That things could become unmistakably clear when before they had been as impenetrable as the night. But it was while sitting there in the darkness of his entry-plug that he realized why he had to fight.

It wasn't that there was no other choice open to him, or that they all had chosen it for him and there was nothing he could do. Yes, those things were outside influences that pulled on him with nagging insistence, but they weren't his reason.

He owed it to Misato to fight for her, like he owed it to Rei and Asuka and all those who had faith in him.

All those who had shared their lives, however painful, with him. He didn't simply have to because it was important for others. He had to fight because he could.

Rei said he should, Asuka expected it of him, and Misato needed him to. None of them could make him. In the end, it was up to him, and him alone. He was the only one who could decide what to do with his life and future. But, while he could decide for himself, he also had to remember that his future was inevitably knotted together with their future. His life with theirs. Bonds between people could not be made alone. He needed others. And he had bonds with them, however painful. His bonds were worth protecting.

They are my friends. My important people. I cannot let their lives be destroyed by doing nothing. Even if it's painful.

Then Shinji felt the Evangelion begin to move. He opened his eyes, not realizing he had ever closed them, and looked around.

"Shinji, we are moving Unit-01 out through the seventeenth exit," Misato said over the communication system. Her voice was clear over the speakers, her tone determined. "This will place you in front of Central Dogma, directly in the Angel's path. There's no time. I'm sorry."

Shinji nodded. What else could he do?

"Okay," he said. "Place me where you think it's best. I'm ready."

"Thank you," Misato said.

Ritsuko Akagi spoke next. Shinji recognized her voice instantly.

"Use your AT Field to neutralize the Angel's and engage in hand-to-hand combat. We have adapted a battery pack to your Eva so that if you lose your power cable the Eva will switch to the battery instead of the S2 engine,"

the blond doctor sounded calm and official, as if checking things from a list. "There hasn't been time to perform any meaningful testing on the engine itself and we believe that if it's activated it could either swallow us into another Sea of Dirac, or provide you with unlimited power. As tempting as that possibility may sound, we just can't take any chances with this thing.

However, even if the S2 engine works and gives Unit-01 perpetual power, human beings only have a certain amount of endurance."

Shinji could tell where this was going.

"Right," Misato said. "That means that if you lose consciousness as a result of the fight, Unit-01 will, most likely, go berserk and we won't be able to do anything to stop it. So be careful, please. I'll let you know as soon as we know anything from Maya and Rei. Don't worry."

She might as well have told him to stop himself from breathing. There was simply no way he wouldn't worry about Rei after what he'd seen.

"Misato . . ." Shinji began, wiping his eyes with a plugsuited forearm, removing what remained of his tears.

"Do you think she—" the word "Death" flashed in his mind, but he couldn't say it. Even the idea was too horrific to consider.

"I'd rather not make any assumptions for now," Misato answered without missing a heartbeat. She must have known he would ask. Shinji realized he could be very obvious sometimes. "Like I said, there's a team on the way, but it's likely Maya will get to her first. All we can do is hope for the best, Shinji. Rei is a strong girl. You know that."

Being silent and obedient doesn't make her strong, Shinji thought. He had seen the bandages in her room, heard her cry in pain, and watched her suffer. Strength . . . some would have just called it prolonged suffering.

“Yeah, I . . . I know,” Shinji said, more to reassure himself than anything else. He didn’t really believe it made much difference. Rei could accept and endure pain, but that would only take someone so far. Everyone had their limit. Sadly, Asuka had proven that.

“Be safe, Shinji,” Misato said. “If it’s worth anything, I apologize again for putting you in this position. I am really sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Shinji said in a soft tone. “This is not your fault.”

“I see you’re really growing up. I’m so proud,” Misato replied.

Shinji nodded his acknowledgement of her words. He was also somewhat aware that it could be the last time he heard Misato’s voice. He felt a little hollow.

At least if I die, I won’t have to worry about things like this anymore, he thought. *If I die everything will stop hurting.*

Outside the canopy of his entry-plug, the dark was suddenly filled with glowing white streaks on black nothingness and occasional flashing lights as the tunnel walls passed him by. Every few seconds a number would appear on his right, indicating a level or floor under the ground. The numbers grew smaller the closer he was lifted towards the surface. In less than a minute, the sleek, armored shape of Evangelion Unit-01 emerged through Exit 17, located a few hundred yards in front of Central Dogma’s pyramidal building.

Shinji quickly scanned his surroundings. The dome of the Geo-Front, like an enormous ceiling, provided a strange sense of confinement despite the massive space below. He could see the upside-down buildings at the dome’s apex, where they had been retracted so many months ago and were still unable to rise because of the artificial lake above, where the city center had once been.

Beneath this lay a forest of green trees, representing nature's humble contribution to the concrete and metal fortress. Like everything else down here, this was an entirely artificial creation, carefully planned and executed. By design, the greenery offered a quiet serenity that in many ways masked the conflicts which had raged so destructively in this place. The loss, grief and pain. In another time and place, he might have thought of the forest as beautiful, but when he looked at it a flurry of unwanted memories came rushing back.

He remembered Asuka's armless and headless Unit-02, frozen still like a monument to its pilot's breakdown. He remembered Ayanami's nearly suicidal charge across this very forest, courageous, selfless, and ultimately pointless.

They were much braver and better than him, but they were hurt just the same. Now piloting Eva was all he could for them. The one way in which he could make a difference. It didn't feel anything like enough.

Shinji turned around, Unit-01 following his movements as an extension of the neural impulses which originated the working of his muscles instead of the muscles themselves. Maybe it was more accurate to say that an Evangelion was worn like a suit rather than piloted—it was certainly not like any aircraft he'd ever heard of despite the control and entry-plug layout—but such distinctions seemed useless given the circumstances.

The few who had been inside an Eva knew nothing in the world could truly compare. No other weapon system came close. And like any weapon it had one goal. In the end, beyond the briefings and the strategy, Shinji was there to kill or be killed.

For that purpose, a large arsenal rack emerged from the ground next to him, holding a long spear with a broad, curving blade.

He grasped it firmly and felt its weight in his hands. Something very primal and alien within him found that comforting. A weapon meant he was not defenseless. He was no longer the slender, whimpery boy who cried when he let others down.

A weapon made him a warrior and gave a physical shape to his purpose.

“No firearms,” Misato explained, completely without need. “You won’t be able to penetrate its AT Field from a distance, so you’ll have to get close. Go for the core, but I think you know that already.”

“I do,” Shinji told her, feeling more certain than he had at any point thus far. He let one hand glide down the spear’s long shaft then clenched the other just below the blade.

The weapon was a part of him now.

“Good. I was afraid you might have forgotten.”

The Third Child wondered if she was being serious. He never got a chance to ask. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a sudden glimpse of light. He turned and gazed up at the Geo-Front’s ceiling.

Unit-01’s sharp, inhuman eyes narrowed, as he understood what was happening. The column of reddish light descended for several seconds and expanded into an inverted cross. Shinji watched as the Angel emerged amidst the light, like some sort of divine figure coming down from Heaven to preach a malevolent gospel of death. It had its wings open, and arms spread apart, more a demon than a saint.

“Initiate cover barrage,” someone said on the communication system.

The barrage poured on the Angel from all sides, a deadly diagonal rain of lead, tungsten and depleted uranium painting streaks across the air, filling the Geo-Front with thundering noises.

The Angel continued its descent, the shells bouncing off the translucent octagonal wall made up by its AT Field.

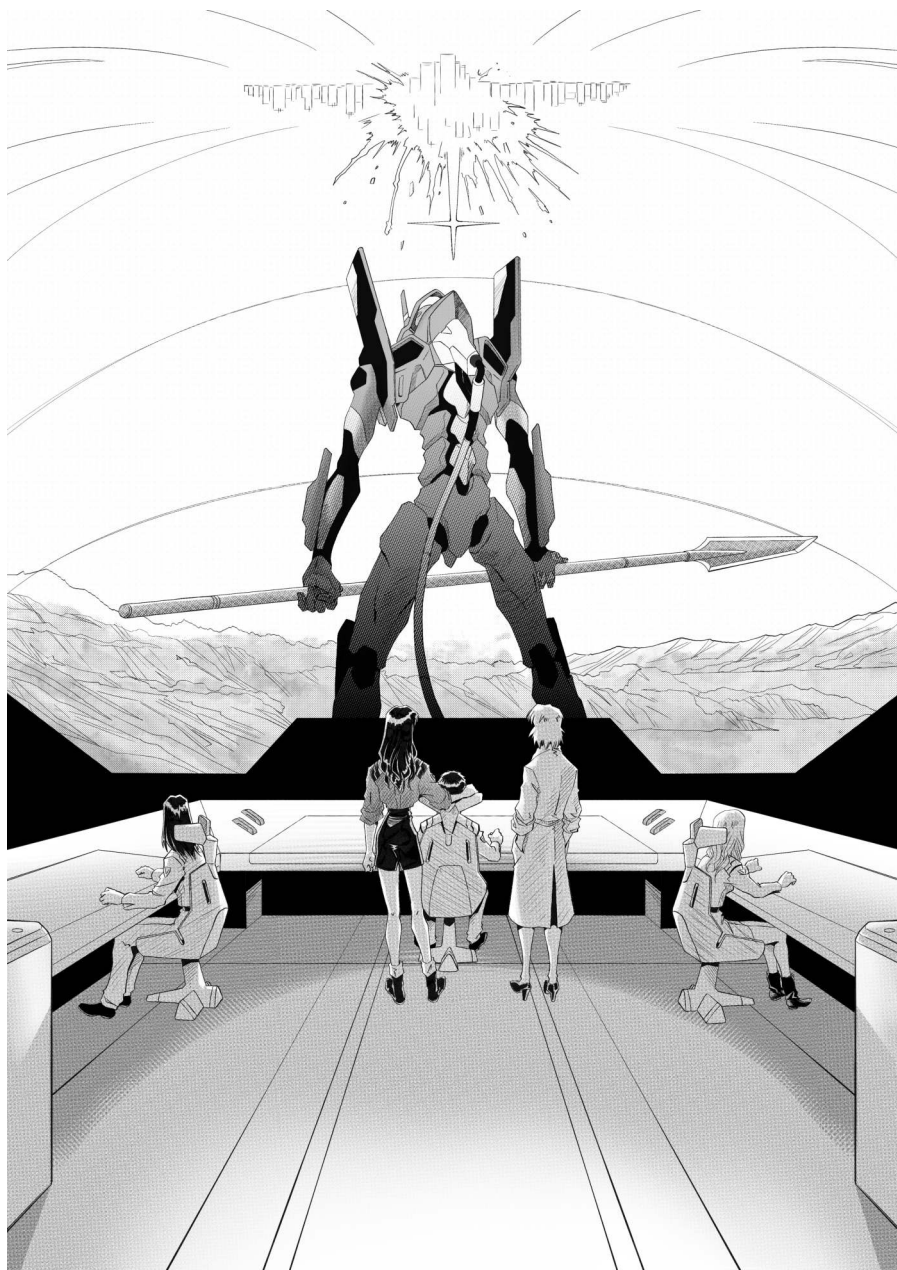
Normally, Shinji would have been reluctant to fight another Eva Unit. The last time he'd done so it was Unit-02 and it was empty, but before that ... he didn't want to think about it. It didn't make any difference now. Misato had told him that there was no human pilot inside this possessed Eva Unit. It had apparently been running a type of autopilot similar to the Dummy System when it transformed into the Angel. That was the extent of the information provided.

Shinji had been relieved, of course, and refrained from asking further questions. Ignorance was bliss, and in cases like this that old maxim could save your sanity. He'd rather remain ignorant for now, even if that meant hating himself later. Besides, he could trust Misato now. At least ... he thought he could.

Nothing related to the Evangelion was ever simple, from the Eva itself to the people associated with it. NERV was a web of secrets wrapped in enigmas, most of which he'd never understand. By sheer necessity, that quality also made it very hard to know who or what to trust. Even Misato was not above twisting the truth, and that filled him with sadness. But when it came down to it, combat itself was surprisingly, brutally, uncompromisingly simple.

*Kill or be killed, Shinji thought again.
As simple as anything ever gets.*

He tightened his grip on the control sticks, and Unit-01 did the same with the spear.





“Damn!” Hyuga peeled off his headset and turned hastily towards Misato. “It’s through. That was even faster than the Fourteenth Angel. What the Hell are they feeding these things?”

“I assume it’s a new record?” Misato asked, but she already knew the answer. Ever since the Fifth Angel, some of the more data-minded staff had started keeping timing on how quickly the Angels could get through the armored floors above Central-Dogma, and the number kept getting smaller. “We’re gonna have to think of some other way to reinforce those barriers. No penetration from those shells, right?”

“No,” Hyuga confirmed.

Of course, Misato thought. God forbid we should get a break.

A hushed murmur rippled through the bridge as concerned faces turned to look at one another. The fear was nearly a physical presence, weighing them all down with a heavy burden. It was far from surprising when someone at last gave words to their worry.

“How can that thing keep blasting away like that?” Haruna said, shaking her head in disbelief.

“It’s quite simple,” Ritsuko said. She stood to Misato’s right, where she’d been quietly observing the screen for the last few minutes. “The S2 engine provides all the necessary energy. If you pay attention to it, you’ll notice that the Angel releases the energy in one concentrated burst. The Angel probably builds it up through AT Field manipulation or some other means so that it can be used as a weapon. The intensity of the burst is likely proportional to the time the Angel has to gather and concentrate it in one place. I could venture a few more guesses as to how it does it, however.”

Misato twisted her lips in disapproval. "Let's leave the scientific lectures for some other time, shall we?" She turned her head and looked sternly at Haruna, as if to tell her to be quiet, and then back to Ritsuko. "Is there any way to predict how long it takes the Angel to build up energy to produce a blast strong enough to harm Unit-01?"

"An algebraic equation should do the trick. The MAGI can estimate the maximum energy output of the S2 engine, from there it's simply a matter of coming up with the right function."

Misato nodded. "Good, do that. Hyuga, what is the Angel's ETA for landfall?"

"A few seconds," the bespectacled operator answered. "It's approximately one hundred meters from the Geo-Front floor and coming down at a steady rate."

Misato nodded again, taking in that last bit of information and processing just as she was doing everything else. "Any casualty reports from the breached layers above?"

"Nothing yet, but that could take some time."

Something we don't have, Misato thought. She leaned over her console, removing her gaze from the large holographic projection at the front and focusing on the smallest instruments below her. A screen displayed Shinji's heartbeat monitor and the rate of his synchrograph, both holding steady for now.

"Any word from Rei?" she asked.

"No," came the answer.

Misato sighed, closing her eyes as she pressed the button that would open a channel to Unit-01. She really wished she could offer the Third Child better news than what she had.

“Shinji?”

The boy did not answer.

“Shinji, I know you’re there.”

“Yes?” Finally came his response, and he sounded serious. More serious than Misato remembered hearing him in a while. The situation called for it, of course, and she would have been worried if he weren’t taking things seriously, but the tone bothered her. Shinji deserved to laugh like the child he was, not this.

His voice brought back the guilt she felt at sending him out there. It also reminded her of her responsibility towards him, of all her broken promises. Then she thought of Rei and Asuka, and how she had let them down as well.

Misato had always wished to protect those she loved. But not only had she failed to do that, she’d caused them even more hurt in the process, whether purposefully or through her neglect. Rei and Shinji being out there was a direct result of that failure. The need for them to continue risking their lives was on her shoulders. A reflection of her deficiencies.

But no matter how she felt, Misato knew there was nothing more she could do for them. It was out of her hands. As it always was in the end. Despite all her training and all the people and hardware which surrounded her, along with the billions of yen in weapons, she was utterly helpless when it came to fighting an Angel. In an instant she would have traded places with the pilots and given her life for theirs.

And yet she couldn’t. Her job was done and now she had to stand aside and watch. Like she had the day her own father sacrificed himself during Second Impact, or when Asuka’s mind was defiled, or when Rei died, or ... when Kaji left her.

She glanced down at the screen showing Shinji's face. The LCL he was submerged in muted the blue of his eyes, turning them darker. She could see some red around the edges. She also saw that the grief had been pushed back for the moment, replaced by grim determination.

"Shinji, the promise I made you, about not having to pilot Eva again ... I never meant to break it," Misato said slowly. "I always wished that you could have a normal life. But now that we are here, I am willing to trust you completely. And I know everyone else here feels the same way. Our future belongs to you. So ..."

She took a deep breath, regretting the fact that she had to say her next words, and regretting even more that it was Shinji who had to hear them. "Eva Unit-01, extend your AT Field. Prepare for battle."

"Understood," Shinji replied without hesitation. "Leave it to me."



The Angel descended among the trees of Central Dogma, and the earth shook and sank beneath its power. Its wings swept backwards as they folded in an almost bird-like manner, the smoothness of the motion striking despite the massive size. Then it stood perfectly still, hunched over, long limbs hanging loosely by its side. Its mouth dropped open, showing rows of sharp teeth behind red lips. Even the air around it seemed to tremble, creating a heavy haze which distorted all vision.

Shinji focused on his enemy and felt a knot tighten in his chest. Most Evangelions he'd ever seen at least retained a basic human resemblance. But this one, with its long pointed snout, burning red eyes and featureless face looked more like some wild nightmarish demon which had decided to storm the waking world. A predator.

Rather than a creature to be fought, this was a thing to be feared.

And it had, more than likely, killed Rei.

Shinji extended Unit-01's AT Field as Misato had told him, and the air around him shimmered with energy. The ground shook as a sudden outflow of hot air pushed in a huge circle, toppling trees like matchsticks and upturning anything within range. The Angel noticed this. It cocked its head as it brought forth its own AT Field, and smashed it into Unit-01's.

The two opposing forces swiftly canceled each other and sent a gust of superheated air sweeping over the walls and across the domed ceiling above their battle.

Even after all that had happened, Shinji did not simply rush into fighting. He knew what was about to take place. The last time he had been in combat the struggle ended with him killing a friend, a memory which still caused him a great deal of pain. It always would. But that was then, and this was now.

"Shinji, the AT Fields are eroding," Misato said over the radio. "Get in close, smash the Angel's core, and get out. Nothing fancy. And don't take any chances."

"I know," Shinji said.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it out slowly, gathering his resolve around himself like a warm blanket. And he repeated the mantra that had carried him through so many tough times before. *I must not run away...*

When he opened his eyes again, they shone as determined blue orbs set under a deep frown.

"I must not run away," he repeated out loud. "I must fight."

Tightening his grip on the spear, Shinji threw himself forward and charged ahead with the speed of a world-class sprinter. Unit-01 jolted into motion, advancing with wide, powerful strides as its body welded into one with its pilot's mind. The earth trembled under its feet, cratering violently as it passed.

"I MUST FIGHT!"

The Angel did not react against the incoming Evangelion. When Unit-01 was a few hundred yards away from its target, Shinji pulled on the controls and sent the purple Eva jumping into the air with incredible agility; the weight and momentum from its movements shattering the ground. Holding the spear with both hands, Shinji swung the large blade forward in midair so that his mass and the full force of the attack would help the spear in penetrating through the Angel's chest armor at the time of impact.

Almost there, he thought. Almost. Almost.

The Third Child clenched his teeth as he tried to concentrate all his power on the blow he was about to deliver. Time seemed to slow down into nothing, and for a few fleeting moments the world outside his entry-plug vanished.

Then the Angel pounced forward, reducing the distance between them in a single split second. Shinji didn't waste his chance. As soon as the Angel came into his range, he brought the spear down on it. When he did, the Angel swiveled its shoulders, almost appearing to lose its balance in the process. The motion was jerky, but enough that Shinji realized he was about to miss. Reacting faster than he ever imagined he could, he twisted the spear's shaft in his hand and swung up as Unit-01 smashed again with both feet into the ground. He missed, but also didn't.

The blade of the spear came down on the Angel's head rather than its core, tearing through the armor and flesh.

The thing's snout ripped wide open like a thick piece of meat under a butcher's cleaver. Tissue split apart cleanly, expelling a fountain of corrupted blood.

"You missed the core!" Misato shouted in his ear.
"Shinji, you have to—!"

"I KNOW!" he screamed.

Shinji saw an explosion of red liquid that rose off the Angel's wound, and he thought he could smell it even over the familiar scent from the LCL around him. Unit-01 finished its leap in a wide stance, legs far apart and breaking the ground under it. The Angel wailed and collapsed backwards, flailing its arms and reaching blindly for the purple Evangelion a few meters away.

His heart racing, Shinji tried to pull the spear out, both hands tight on the shaft, so that he could shove it into the core and bring an end to the battle. But the blade, strong as it was, could not take the gigantic forces placed upon it. The broad metal bent first, then snapped cleanly off.

"Dammit!" Shinji cursed, but before the word had even left his lips, he jerked aside to avoid a blow from the Angel's clenched fist. He swung the spear like a club. The Angel blocked it, then hit him in the stomach. "Stop moving around!"

As the Angel continued flailing, Shinji had Unit-01 push off from it and climb quickly on top before it could retreat and regroup, pinning the white humanoid form to the ground with Unit-01's armored knees and its enormous weight. The Angel struggled weakly under the Evangelion's bulk. It threw out both arms defensively, hands grabbing but finding little leverage. Shinji ejected the broken blade from the tip of the spear, turned the staff around and deployed the secondary one on the opposite end.

The Angel screeched, intensifying the fury of its motions. Shinji reached down and grabbed it by the neck, hoping he could immobilize it before he delivered the killing strike. But as he drew back the spear, he caught a glimpse of the Angel's red eyes. He hesitated. Then two images came to mind: the first one was of Rei Ayanami's surreal red eyes, and the second was of Kaworu's.

In a moment of pure madness, it seemed to Shinji Ikari that those were not the same eyes he'd seen on the Angel when it first came down. They had changed or appeared to have changed. He knew these eyes.

We are the same, Shinji Ikari.

Shinji froze. Something familiar tugged insistently at the back of his mind. A distant memory he thought he had forgotten. A deep pain besides the empty hollow space reserved in his heart for regret, and a lost happiness. The Angel narrowed its eyes and appeared suddenly very human.

"What's wrong?" Misato was yelling. "Shinji!"

But Shinji wasn't listening to her. The memory had become a vivid image in his head, that of a sharp-faced boy with a faint smile and ash-gray hair. He didn't understand. He didn't have to. All he knew was that for some reason he could not put the thought aside.

"Kaworu?" he whispered, his voice sounding sad and lonely in his own ears.

Kill me so that you may live.

And he had done just that. He had killed Kaworu. The one person who confessed his love unconditionally. He had killed him. How could it be that this thing now had those same eyes? How could it know?

“Shinji, get out of there!” Misato’s voice came again, full of panic. “Move back!”

The light consumed everything. Shinji tried to turn away but there was no escape. He felt as if a hammer had crashed against every inch of his body at the same time as the force of the blast hit Unit-01, throwing it backwards. Shinji rolled onto his side and covered his head in an attempt to protect it.

By the time the light dissipated, Shinji was surprised that he was still alive—still in the fight. And in a lot of pain. His chest burned when he gasped for air, and his head felt like it was about to split. He rubbed it with his gloved hand as he leaned forward, glancing towards the outside.

The Angel was rising amongst the smoke, the spear blade protruding from its snout. Blood oozed into its open, terrifying jaws like red rivers on white steel. And it seemed to be smiling.

* * *

“Shinji, are you there?” Misato leaned over one of the other consoles in a frantic attempt to receive first-hand information after her own station and its screens had gone dark. In the process, she’d almost pushed Hyuga out of his chair.

“Dammit, answer me. Shinji?”

“Major,” Hyuga pushed her off awkwardly. “I can’t see.”

“Status report!”

Hyuga quickly checked his console and gathered what data he could. “I can’t be sure. Unit-01 appears to be mostly undamaged. The visuals are out along with the sensors. Possibly due to close-range electromagnetic waves.”

“The energy from the blast was not strong enough to harm Unit-01,” Ritsuko said, her voice cold and calculating as always. Her icy eyes were fixed on the wall of static that was the main holographic display. “It didn’t have enough time.”

“How’s Shinji?” Misato asked, the concern she felt evident in her voice. She placed a hand on Hyuga’s shoulder. “Can you switch to back-up telemetry?”

There was a moment of silence while the operator performed the required action.

“He’s all right, by the looks of it,” Hyuga finally confirmed, hands moving fast over his console like those of a master pianist. “His heart-rate is elevated but still within the safety parameters. No sign of contamination or interference.”

Feeling a huge weight suddenly lift from her chest, Misato Katsuragi heaved a sigh of relief. Shinji had survived the blast and was still able to fight. That was good. She couldn’t ask for more than that. Well, she could ask for the Angel to lay down and die, but that wasn’t going to happen.

“He had it,” Ritsuko said from behind her. “Shinji could have killed it.”

Misato whipped around and gave the blonde doctor a hard stare.

“What was that?”

“He could’ve killed it, but he hesitated. He had it. Something must have happened to him.”

Misato frowned, unsure if she understood. “He got blasted. Other than that . . . you’ve been looking at the same feed I have. He missed with the spear, that’s all. Unless you noticed something I didn’t.”

The blonde shook her head, still betraying no emotion. Sometimes Misato could really hate her for that. She straightened up and looked around just as one screen regained an image. It was followed by dozens more blinking to life, and eventually the main protection at the front.

“Visual systems are back online,” Haruna announced from her console. She was still rather upset, judging by the look on her face, but she was holding on. “All the sensor feeds have returned to normal as well. MAGI is processing inputs.”

Misato turned her attention back to the console in front of her. “Shinji, can you hear me?” she called out. “Get your progressive knife and destroy the core. It will need time to gather energy for the next blast.”

There was no answer.

On the screen they saw Unit-01 react and knew Shinji had heard the order. He was still in the fight. Misato offered a silent prayer and watched.

* * *

Shinji tossed away the spear and extracted the progressive knife from the sheath inside Unit-01’s right shoulder pylon. He held the knife firmly in front, using both hands, his posture defensive. Slowly, he took a step forward. His head was throbbing.

The Angel did not attack. Instead, it pulled itself up out of the huge crater which the blast had opened on the ground, and just stood there, almost as if daring him to strike first again. Its head was mauled and bloodied, but somehow, even with the spear’s blade sticking out of its snout, it managed to appear more

menacing than wounded. Blood continued flowing like an endless river and cascaded into its open mouth, filtering between its teeth, and pouring down its chin.

“I must not run away!”

Shinji charged again, the progressive knife leading the way. This time, the Angel did not ignore him. As Unit-01 closed in, it sprang forward to meet it with heavy, powerful strides. The earth shook under all that energy and weight. Trees splintered and shattered, sending clumps of leaves and dirt flying.

Unit-01 crashed into the onrushing enemy with ferocious brutality, sending shockwaves that seemed to break the air around them. But as Shinji tried to bring the progressive knife down on the thing's core, the Angel reached up with both arms and managed to block the blow. He then tried to overpower it, leaning against it with all his might. It was in vain. The Angel didn't move, its arms stiff like iron rods.

Shinji felt his muscles burning as he pushed the control sticks and himself forward, willing every ounce of his strength into the attack. It made no difference. Both Unit-01 and the Angel were now locked in combat, and neither was giving ground. However, neither could overpower the other through physical strength alone.

“Come ON!” Shinji roared. “You bastard! You hurt Rei!”

He did not expect what happened next.

The Angel sidestepped, reversed its grip and pulled Unit-01's arms forward. The momentum brought the purple Evangelion temporarily off balance. It was just for a second, but that was long enough for the Angel to gain the upper hand. It moved sideways and, as Shinji struggled to take a wide swing at it with the knife, the monster smashed its head against Unit-01's.

Pain spiked in his head as if from the blow of a hammer. In a way, it had—a hammer of flesh and armor and evil intent. Shinji recoiled as Unit-01 was forced back, reaching for his head and seeing white stars.

The Angel pressed the advantage, tackling Unit-01 with open arms, nearly picking it up and slamming it into the ground. But the second it reached down and made a furious grab at the downed Evangelion's neck, Shinji stabbed upwards with the knife, screaming, in a purely defensive reflex. The knife sliced through the Angel's hand just below the knuckles and ripped through the flesh and bone down the length of its forearm.

The Angel produced a horrible bellowing sound like something from a mad beast. It quickly pulled its maimed hand away and backed off, bleeding from yet another wound. Shinji took his chance. He brought Unit-01's right leg against his chest and kicked the Angel in the head. Metal and flesh groaned. The Angel tumbled backwards, opening the distance between them. Unit-01 sprang to its feet and Shinji used all the strength he had to smash his opponent to the ground, knife still in hand.

Shinji swung down furiously, but the Angel squirmed just enough that the blade caught the armor sideways without penetrating it. He didn't see the blow which struck him until he felt the pressure in his face. His head jerked violently back, slammed into the seat behind and bounced forward. Before he could even think, he returned the punch, swinging blindly and hitting something hard. The Angel grunted.

He punched again, then shoved the knife downwards. The Angel caught Unit-01's wrist and shoved its other hand against its throat. Seeing this, Shinji jerked back just in time to stop having his neck crushed.

Then the Angel began to sit up, and it seemed like all of Unit-01's weight couldn't stop it. Gritting his teeth, Shinji rained more punches on it with his free hand. Each time he did, the Angel hit him in return, taking more of this strength with every blow and steadily forcing him back. Eventually, he felt his wrist being turned, the fingers holding the knife opening. Realizing what was about to happen, Shinji pushed himself off with a kick, but it was too late. His knife dropped. He withdrew, fighting for balance. The Angel followed him.

As they moved, circling back and forth, they carried on trading savage blows like a pair of lions fighting for dominance. There was no coordination in the fight anymore. No tactics or advice. The battle turned into a vicious brawl with the only objective being to maim the opponent beyond any ability to resist as they proceeded to hammer at each other with hands, feet and heads. In the process, they laid waste to the landscape around them. Dirt flew in huge clumps, masses of trees uprooted, roads shattered, and light posts toppled.

Shinji was having the best of it. He took the Angel down and repeatedly smashed his fists against the thing's elongated, bloody head. No matter what he did, however, the Angel seemed to be able to take more punishment than Unit-01 could dish out. It kicked the Evangelion away and, as Shinji staggered to regain his balance, reached out to grab Unit-01's throat.

Shinji reacted quickly. He pushed the thing's good arm aside and shoved his elbow into its pulped face. The force of the blow turned the Angel almost completely around. The front of its head was now little more than a shapeless bloody mass with the spear blade sticking out from the ripped flesh. Moving with lightning speed despite his growing injuries, Shinji wrapped his forearm around its neck in a fierce chokehold.

“I won’t let you get away!” Shinji grunted, eyes alight with anger, blood filling his mouth and pouring from his swollen nose. “Not this time!”

The Angel collapsed onto its knees. Unit-01 piled on behind it, wrapping both arms around its neck in a tight chokehold. Grunting from the effort, Shinji pulled and yanked and squeezed until he heard the vertebrae begin to complain. His heartbeat quickened into a frantic pounding. His breathing became ragged pants for air, each hurting more than the last.

But all his strength was not enough, and the longer he tried the more time and energy he surrendered. He forced himself to focus. The progressive knife was still around somewhere; if he could get it—

The Angel pitched forward. With both arms on its neck, Shinji couldn’t do anything as it reached down into the ground and came up with a slim object in its hand.

Belatedly, Shinji realized that the thing had grabbed the staff of his discarded spear. There wasn’t anywhere for him to go.

The Angel pitched forwards in an effort to gain some leverage over Unit-01, then shoved the staff backwards into the Evangelion.

As the staff pierced through Unit-01 shoulder, punching through the armor and tearing away at the muscle, Shinji felt an excruciating, stabbing pain. Screaming, he pulled away from the Angel and reached up to his wounded shoulder. That was a mistake.

The Angel spun around. Wounds gushed openly, staining its bent and dented armor. But as it lunged and wrapped its battered arms around Unit-01’s torso, its embrace closed in like a steel ring crushing Shinji’s chest. Even after the beating it’d endured,

the strength was shocking, like it wasn't affected while he grew weak and hurt. Then its wings opened. The arms tightened. Shinji felt his breath forcefully leave his lungs, and when he tried to breathe again, he thought his ribs would crack from the pain.

Despite this, however, he still tried shoving the monster off. It was no use. Again, he simply was not strong enough. Never strong enough. He was not a warrior, after all. Just an ordinary boy, someone who fought because he had to.

"Damn you!" Shinji groaned, between ragged gasps for air. The Angel held tight, bleeding all over. It made a noise which resembled gurgling but might have been laughter.

For some reason, the notion that it could laugh horrified the Third Child.

The two humanoid combatants were airborne with a massive flap of the Angel's wings, lifting ponderously as no machine ever could. Unable to think of anything else to do, in fear and growing desperation, Shinji began wildly hammering his fist into the thing's head, smashing into already broken armor and brutalized flesh. The Angel screeched horribly, but soon it could fly no more. Both of them came spiraling down, falling like a pair of enormous, bleeding vultures.

They crashed into Central Dogma's pyramidal building, completely demolishing one of the sides in a deafening cauldron of concrete, steel, and smoke. Unit-01 took the brunt of the impact, landing first, with the mass of the Angel collapsing on top of it.

Shinji screamed as blood spewed from his mouth. The taste was awful and familiar. For the first time the notion that he was probably going to die flashed through his mind. He was hurting so badly that he almost welcomed it.



Inside Central Dogma, all hell had broken loose. Light flickered, support beams collapsed, walls bent and crumpled. And inside the bridge, the most secure location within the structure, screens exploded, alarms sounded, people screamed, and it seemed like the world would end that very instant.

Misato fell hard to the ground, as did most of the other people in the control room—at least those not sitting in their chairs. The lights went out and all systems were changed to back-up power. Then it stopped.

Above this scene of confusion, Hyuga's voice rose like a beacon. "Massive damage to the building's north side! They HIT us!"

"Try not to act surprised," Aoba said. "It's not the first time."

"If we are lucky it won't be the last either," Haruna added.

"Everyone, be quiet," Misato ordered, picking herself up with a groan. Other people were doing the same, either sitting up or getting back on their feet. Some of them were stumbling and bleeding. "Get me the status of Unit-01"

She looked around the room. Ritsuko was on her knees. Haruna was cradling her head and supporting herself on the side of her chair.

"It's still operational," the blonde technician replied after checking her console from where she was sitting on the floor. Misato thought she'd put her in for a commendation. Hyuga and Aoba soon retook their own seats.

"The building is not compromised," Aoba said.
"Thank God for geometry."

“We’re definitely going to blow the budget again,” Hyuga suggested.

“Worry about money later, when we survive.” Staggering, Misato resumed her position beside Hyuga, again peering over his console. Most of it seemed non-operational. A few of the screens were cracked. “Shinji, can you hear me?” she croaked. “Shinji?”

There was no reply.

* * *

Shinji could feel the blood running down his forehead and into his mouth. He could feel his body screaming, every muscle sore. He wanted to be sick. But somehow, he pushed the pain away and managed to concentrate long enough to get his bearings.

“Shinji!” Misato was screaming. “Shinji, answer me!”

The Angel had pinned Unit-01 to the devastated structure of the pyramid’s north side by placing its weight on top of the Evangelion. Shinji tried getting it off with a hand, but the Angel smashed its head against his repeatedly. Any strength he might have had disappeared. For a moment, he feared his head was about to explode. It hurt so bad. Everything hurt.

“No ...” Shinji groaned. “I won’t ... I have to fight.”

Kill me so you can survive.

The words came in Kaworu’s voice. Shinji recognized it. The friend who had given his life so Shinji and everyone else could live. The boy whose destiny was to die. But Shinji couldn’t accept such a cruel fate. Even if he had been an Angel,

Kaworu wasn't a bad person. He deserved better than death. Shinji's other loved ones did as well. That meant he had to keep fighting.

*But why? Shinji suddenly thought to himself.
If I die, then the pain will go away. I won't have to worry about hurting
Asuka again. I won't have to worry about protecting Rei.
I will see Kaworu again. And my mother.*

It wouldn't be so bad.

Die. Kaworu's voice came again. Die with me.

"Shinji!"

Like most animals, Eva units could not smile, but the way the Angel curled the corners of its monstrous mouth gave it a devilish grin. And it was the second time it did that. Somehow this thing must have learned the meaning behind the gesture. It must have learned ... Did Angels learn? Did it understand?

Shinji clenched his teeth as he awaited the next, and doubtlessly final blow, but none ever came. The Angel backed off and stepped away.

Shinji felt confused. For a second, he thought he had lost his mind.

"What ..."

Misato was still talking, her voice beyond distraught. "Shinji, are you all right?"

"It ... it stopped attacking," Shinji said weakly, unsure if that answered Misato's question. He wasn't sure how he was still conscious to start with. His whole world was in a fog. He must have had a concussion by now. The LCL should protect him, but only to an extent. It couldn't stop the neural feedback causing damage.

And it wasn't just his brain. When he tried to breathe, it felt like inhaling fire. "W ... why?"

A damage report blinked automatically into his display, showing several of Unit-01's body parts in varying degrees of yellow and orange. Then a flash of intense light in his peripheral vision caught his attention. The ground trembled.

"The Angel has blown open one of our Eva exits," someone informed him. Shinji didn't know whose voice it was. Not Misato's. "It's number 43, I think. Yes. Confirm Exit 43."

*I have to fight. Get up. Get up, Stupid Shinji.
You're going to let everyone down. Is that what you want?*

Slowly, in agony, Shinji pulled Unit-01 up from among the shattered ruins of the pyramid. Concrete rubble and bent steel beams rolled off the dented purple armor in large quantities. As he regained some of his balance, he cast a glance towards the Angel and saw it standing in front of a huge smoking hole in the ground.

Before he could even begin to guess what it was doing, the Angel spread its huge white wings and plunged like a diving raptor into the exit tunnel, disappearing from sight. It was moving ... deeper into Central Dogma, Shinji realized. Not retreating. He gasped for air, but it was too much for his battered body and he collapsed into coughing, filling the hot LCL around him with small clouds of blood.

Down, he thought. It's going down.

"Mi-Misato," Shinji groaned, his throat so sore it was a miracle he could speak, "where ... where's it going?"



“Where does that exit go?” Misato hurriedly repeated the question. She was now standing beside Hyuga and peering over his shoulder. “Pull up the schematic.”

“On it,” the young operator said, already pressing buttons on his console.

At the front of the bridge, the large hologram shifted into a blueprint view showing Central Dogma from the side, with each floor and tunnels outlined in glowing blue lines. The Angel was currently represented as a single red dot, moving down a shaft. Numbers appeared next to it with labels indicating “Depth” and “Rate of Descent.”

“The vertical shaft goes from the surface to the main holding cage,” it was Haruna who answered. She had a bruise on her head but had not left her station. Her eyes shot wide open as the full meaning behind words she had just said sank in. “Oh, no.” She raised her head and looked at Misato. “Ma’am, Unit-02 is still on hold. Third Catapult. Main cage.”

There was no need to point out the obvious. Misato knew perfectly well where Unit-02 had been deployed, and could see from the blueprint where the shaft terminated. Her blood ran cold merely considering the prospect of what might now happen if the Angel reached the bottom. In its current state, the red Eva wouldn’t be able to defend itself much less fight. Defeating the Angel was not even a possibility. On the contrary, it would be a sitting duck.

And Asuka remained inside it.

“Close all the armored doors on exit 43,” Misato ordered.
“That might slow that thing down.
What is the fastest way to the main cage?”

“Exit 6E,” Aoba answered. “It crosses over the 43rd at about 400 yards above the final barrier. Unit-01 could use it to intercept the Angel at Door 435, but its slope requires an elevator. The Angel’s rate of descent is greater than our fastest elevator. We won’t be able to intercept the target before it reaches the main cage.”

“Can we evacuate Unit-02?” Haruna asked.
“An emergency crew can retrieve Asuka.”

Hyuga shook his head. “Negative. Getting the gantries back in place alone would take fifteen to twenty minutes. Even if we eject the entry-plug it will be left in the cage before anyone can retrieve it, and it still risks injuring the pilot.”

“What about removing the locks on the platform servos for the 6E elevator?” Aoba suggested. “That would allow the elevator to ride the rails down under its own weight. It’s like riding a car without breaks but it would get us there as fast as possible.”

“That could work,” Hyuga said. “It will wreck the elevator, though.”

“Half the building is already wrecked anyway.
What’s an elevator added onto the pile?”

“Can you remove the locks remotely?” Misato asked.

“They have explosive bolts,” Aoba said. “Once Unit-01 is on it, we can destroy the whole mechanism and let it fall.”

“The rails can take the weight, that’s for sure,” someone else said. “But it will be a nasty stop at the bottom. We will need to open every door along the route and hope there are no obstructions.”

*It’s better than nothing, Misato thought.
And nothing is the only other option.*

Her mind was made up. Looking around herself, she could tell that the others in the bridge shared both her decision and the rationale for making it. They had to act now, or it would be over for Asuka, and everyone else.

Misato gave the order.

“All right, clear Exit 6E and get an elevator ASAP.” She leaned in closer to the screen displaying the battered Unit-01, some of its armor missing and some other parts so badly bent they might be unsalvageable. It was moving and extricating itself from the rubble. “Shinji? I know you are there, and I know you can hear me. Listen carefully.”

* * *

Shinji had moved Unit-01 towards Exit 43 and was now kneeling on its edge, breathing hard and bleeding. He clutched a hand to his aching chest as he looked down at the seemingly interminable darkness of the exit tunnel, lined with small lights that ran down in neat lines into vast, foreboding nothingness. Smoke billowed around the rim from the energy which destroyed the outside cover. He could still feel the immense heat in the air.

To Shinji, the scene resembled the entrance to Hell itself.

“Asuka?” Shinji repeated, a cold lump suddenly forming in his throat. He also noticed that his jaw hurt a lot more when he spoke, and his head was pounding just from thinking.

“Yes, it’s going to the main cage. Unit-02 is there,” Misato sounded desperately concerned. Shinji could hardly believe what she was saying. How could Asuka still be in the main cage with all that was happening?

“Misato—”

“We are providing an elevator for you through Exit 6E,” Misato continued hurriedly. “That should allow you to get to the main cage safely.”

“Am I going to get there before the Angel?” Shinji asked. He looked down into the tunnel again, imagining the Angel as it descended and all the carnage it could create. And Unit-02 ... Asuka had no way to defend herself or fight back.

“It’s unlikely, I’m sorry,” Misato answered honestly, and he could tell by the way her voice dropped off that it pained her. “We will blow the servos on the elevator so it falls down on its own weight with Unit-01 riding it down but even then, there’s no guarantee it will get there before the Angel.”

Shinji shook his head. “What about Asuka?”

“We can’t evacuate her in time by normal means. Even emergency extraction procedures would take—”

“You can’t leave her there!” Shinji yelled. A part of him was aware that Misato did not deserve to be yelled at, but his emotions were running raw and the sudden influx of fear made it impossible to control himself. He would need to apologize later if he lived.

“She can’t fight!”

“Shinji, I know.”

“Then you have to get her out!” he insisted, but the more he shouted, the more painful it became. He didn’t think he could argue much longer without passing out. And then he would still have to get down somehow.

“We can’t. And there is only one way to get to the main cage in time to do anything—Exit 6E,” Misato repeated. “We can only hope that the Angel doesn’t see Unit-02 as a threat and leaves it alone. But you have to hurry.”

“No,” Shinji told her as an idea suddenly occurred to him. His eyes were still fixed on the tunnel. Dark, deep, and large enough for the Angel. That meant it was also large enough for Unit-01. “There is another way.”

“Trust me, Shinji. There isn’t.”

“You’re wrong.”

Shinji ejected the power cable from Unit-01’s back by pressing a button on his control stick. At once the battery was activated. A small timer appeared in the corner of his HUD starting at five minutes, counting down. He wiped the blood from his brow with a forearm and took hold of the spear staff that was still penetrating Unit-01’s shoulder with his other hand. Gritting his teeth against the sharp stabbing pain, he pulled it out.

“Shinji, Exit 6E. Now!” Misato ordered, perhaps beginning to suspect what he was about to do.

“I have to go after it,” Shinji said, yet even as he did, he wondered why he was still fighting and willing to go into such extremes when all was likely lost anyway. He should let it all end now. He had fought bravely and done his part. So why couldn’t he give up?

*Don't be an idiot. It's because you have to protect them—protect her.
After all you've done to hurt her, you owe her this much.
You can't abandon her.*

Shinji wasn't really sure where that realization came from, but he felt it was right. As right as anything ever was in his life. It wasn't a conscious, rational thought. Not something from the brain, but perhaps from his heart. However, it didn't make much of a difference. He still had to decide. And he did.

To his surprise, he found that it wasn't a hard choice.

Shinji held the staff tightly. Even though the blades had been destroyed, he could still shove it into the Angel's core and destroy it. He could have asked for another one. He could have asked for any weapon he wanted, but there was no time. The broken spear would be as good as anything else.

"Shinji, what are you doing?" Misato's voice sounded alarmed.
"Shinji, stop. The elevator will be up soon. Please don't—"

The Third Child ignored her, knowing there was no point in explaining. If Misato really cared for him as she claimed, she would understand. So, he closed his eyes and dove, head first, after the Angel.

Into the darkness.



“Unit-01 has entered Exit 43!” Aoba announced. His face was grim, eyes focused on the holographic display which now showed Unit-01 as a green dot falling into the tunnel and approaching the Angel’s red dot. “It’s free-falling and closing the distance to the Angel.”

Misato Katsuragi shook her head in dismay. The situation was quickly spiraling out of control. She was angry, but she couldn’t ignore what angered her the most—that Shinji, by disobeying an order meant to help him, had placed himself in a situation that was more dangerous than anyone could have foreseen.

There would be no room to maneuver in the main cage, but the impact from falling into it from such a distance might completely destroy it anyway. He might not even be able to put up a fight. If he did somehow get there, the battle would only get more brutal, with no way to retreat or back off. And with Unit-02 there . . . Asuka was in no condition to help. Unit-02 would only get in the way.

Misato suddenly felt a cold shiver run down her spine as the thought of Shinji plunging into that tunnel hit her with full force. He was hurting, she understood that, but the action he’d just taken bordered on reckless idiocy.

Well, she thought, Asuka did always call him an idiot. Maybe I should have listened.

The NERV Major suddenly felt very exhausted.

“How much time is left on Unit-01’s battery?” she asked, somehow managing to shift gears in her mind and focus on what she could do.

The reply came from Haruna. “Just over two minutes.”

“If he doesn’t destroy the Angel’s core before the battery runs out ...” Ritsuko started, but didn’t finish. Everyone in the bridge was aware of what she meant without her saying it.

A deep silence fell over the cavernous space, interrupted only by the whirling of computers and beeping machines.

The dots on the screen moved closer and closer and closer, green overtaking red with frightening speed.

Misato sighed deeply and wrapped her arms around herself. She knew that if worse came to worst, she would have to give the order for Central Dogma to be destroyed—her final order. She tried not to think about that. Mainly because to give such a command was the same as admitting the fact that Shinji would fail to destroy the Angel.

*Shinji can do it, Misato told herself.
He will beat it. He knows what’s at stake.*

“Major Katsuragi.”

Misato turned around and looked up at the observation deck to face Gendo Ikari. He was standing, which was never a good thing. So far he’d stayed out of the battle, but she had a feeling that was about to change. “Yes, sir?”

“Prepare Unit-02 for combat,” Ikari said in a calm voice.

“But sir ... Asuka’s not—”

“I am aware of the Second Child’s current situation.” His expression didn’t change. A face of stone hidden behind thick glasses. “It’s irrelevant whether she can fight or not. We will use Unit-02, even if it is just as a decoy.”

Misato's heart sank. Suddenly she was lost. In some ruthlessly practical part of her mind, she knew it could be a sound tactical decision, but it was not one she was in any way ready to make. Asuka could not fight. It was that simple. The Angel might ignore Unit-02 and not perceive it as a threat if it was left inactive. Having Asuka attempt to fight in her current state would be a death sentence.

And Misato refused to carry that on her conscience. Sending the children into combat was always justified, at least on some level, by the idea that they had the means to win and could do so with minimal harm to themselves. That was what good tactics were for. One of the most important parts of her job. To keep them safe. She couldn't just needlessly throw away Asuka's life. Not while Shinji was still out there. So long as he was, she had hope it shouldn't come to that.

I will not sacrifice Asuka for nothing, Misato thought.

But before she could make her reply, Hyuga yelled from his console and effectively ended the argument.

"Unit-01 will come into contact with the target in less than five seconds!"

* * *

When Unit-01 crashed into the Angel, the sudden impact made Shinji feel like he had just smashed into a solid concrete wall. The entry-plug shook violently, throwing him around the seat and console, and slamming him against the support bulkheads on either side. The pain was unbelievable, and for a moment he feared he would pass out.

I must not run away, he thought, growing frantic. I must not run away. Must not run away. Not run away. Not run.

He clenched his teeth as hard as he could to keep from screaming himself hoarse, but it was like biting down on a stick while someone cut you open. His chest burned every time he took a breath, and the pain along his shoulder had begun making that arm useless. Through all the hurt, however, he remained lucid enough to realize what he had to do and what would happen should he fail.

As Unit-01 clung to the Angel's back, Shinji reached a hand and grabbed one of its wings along the leading edge. He yanked hard. The sound of ripping flesh filled the entry-plug. The Angel roared, a loud, high-pitched sound more like a scream than anything he'd heard it utter so far. An unholy, hellish screech.

Shinji kept ripping and tearing the wing almost completely from its root. The uneven lift and mangled flight profile sent them careening uncontrollably into one of the tunnel's walls with a resounding crash, bending the metal where it impacted. Shinji groaned in pain, but the damage was done; the Angel could no longer hold both itself and Unit-01 in the air. Together, they plummeted downward, spinning, and bouncing left and right.

In the ensuing chaos, Shinji grabbed the thing's neck and squeezed, riding the Angel like someone rides a bucking bull, the spear shaft tightly clenched in one hand. But as he prepared to impale his enemy, they slammed once more into the wall and started tumbling. Shinji lost his grip on the spear and watched it fall into the endless darkness beneath them.

He cursed again and held on for dear life. The Angel screeched and bellowed furiously, flapping what remained of its wings as it made one final effort to remain airborne.

Maybe on its own it would have made it, clawing at the walls and propping itself up like a climber ascending a ravine. The added weight of Unit-01 proved too much to support, however. Its mere presence became a weapon.

Plunging madly in hand-to-hand combat in the middle of a dark tunnel was hardly the sort of situation he'd ever wish to find himself in, but Shinji was aware if he could somehow keep the Angel under him it would break his fall at least. Perhaps even get crushed by Unit-01 on impact.

I'm probably not that lucky, Shinji thought, and wondered why that hurt.

The Angel continued screaming, the noise piercing Shinji's eardrums, hands shoving back and slamming against Unit-01. Shinji shifted his weight rapidly as they struggled, hoping he could maintain the purple Eva centered on the monster's back and therefore prevent it from rolling. Somehow that worked. The Angel remained under him.

He couldn't tell how long it had been, or how long it would be until they reached the bottom. It seemed like it took an eternity.

And then both the Angel and Unit-01 smashed into the first armored door.

Shinji's head jerked violently forward. Indescribable pain exploded inside his chest. For a moment he saw only white stars, heard nothing but ringing in his ears, and tasted warm blood in his mouth. He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe.

I'm going to die, the thought crossed his mind. *God, please not yet. Not before I kill this thing! I won't go yet! I have to fight!*

He began punching the Angel, wildly, frantically, with growing desperation and strength born from terror. Blood erupted from the battered flesh. Bones crunched, both the Angel's and Unit-01's, and his own.

"Damn you!" Shinji screamed, his voice rising and breaking at the same time. His eyes were wide and full of trembling rage.

"Damn you! DAMN YOU!"

The armor plating below them held for only a few seconds, enough to give several precarious groans as the metal door buckled and slipped off of its rails. Then it collapsed.

Shinji closed his eyes as Unit-01 resumed falling into hell. But as it did he knew that he would be dragging the Angel along with him. He knew the ride would end in the main holding cage, and then, should he even survive the fall, he would not only have to destroy the Angel, but also protect Unit-02 and Asuka.

Asuka . . .

Her name appeared as a single word in his mind's eye. Just one simple word which carried with it an infinity of unspoken emotions and memories that were both bitter and sweet. One word that meant so much to him.

No matter what, he would not let the Angel touch her.





The Second Child sat curled in a ball inside her entry-plug, her feet up on the console in front and her head behind her knees.

More than once, she had considered that perhaps she should check on the bridge, ask for an update on the battle raging above, but she never did. There was no point—at any moment she expected the technicians to come back to get her. Rei or Shinji would be the hero, and she would be left to seethe and suffer alone. Like always.

Then the lights in the plug were switched on, swirling around her in a spinning kaleidoscope of color before resolving into a clear canopy, and she realized for the first time that Unit-02 had been fully activated.

“What?” Asuka raised her head and looked outside, where the cage walls gleamed with silvery steel. She didn’t understand. “I’m ... fighting?”

No, that didn’t make any sense. Why would they activate Unit-02 at a time like this? It could not be used to fight. Misato and the others knew that. They knew she was a useless, pathetic failure. So why bother?

Her hand reached over towards the communication switch on her control yoke, but before she could open a channel, she remembered that Unit-02 was still Unit-01’s backup regardless of whether or not she was able to enter combat. An activation could only mean that both Rei and Shinji had been defeated.

That thought made Asuka feel as if a cold vice had been wrapped around her heart. Shinji was probably dead by now. The anger she felt at her pitiful condition boiled over to self-loathing in a flash,

like water meeting the fuel rods of a nuclear reactor. She wrinkled her face, clenched her teeth until they hurt, and curled even tighter.

Stupid, she chided herself, on the edge of tears. *Stupid, stupid, stupid little girl. You always were. You always will be. You—*

And then the sky came crashing down.

It was as if the entire Geo-Front had collapsed on top of her. The ceiling of the main cage gave way with a thunder-like groan as the metal and concrete were crushed under some immense weight. Every inch of the enclosed space shook. Metal gantries snapped and fell. The walls seemed to bend outwards like rubber as the forces that were suddenly unleashed upon them threatened to shatter the space's structural integrity. There was dust and debris everywhere, rising in solid billowing clouds so thickly that the lights all but vanished.

Asuka acted instinctively, clutching her head and shielding it behind her knees, and imagined she was going to die. But it wasn't death itself that scared her; it was the fact that she didn't want it to be like this. She had always wanted to die as a brave warrior with a weapon in her hand. Not like the helpless animal she had become.

The Angel, she thought, *it's here. It made it all this way.*

The chaos and mayhem continued for a few seconds, but eventually everything settled in huge piles of debris on every side shrouded by billowing clouds of concrete dust. A grave silence fell inside Unit-02, broken only by the soft hum of its life-support system.

Carefully lifting her head, Asuka looked beyond the canopy layout of her entry-plug, knowing that if some nightmarish monster came for her there was nothing she could do to defend herself. She'd die a shameful, helpless death.

As the heaviest portion of the dust drifted down, the lighter particles created a sort of swirling gray mist. In that mist, she saw a humanoid shape lumbering around her and hoped it would be Unit-01. It wasn't. When the shape stumbled closer, almost on top of her, she caught her first glimpse of the Angel's grotesquely deformed head, a mass of rotting flesh with part of a blade emerging from the weeping ulcerous folds.

Then the Angel reached into another pile of debris, and pulled Unit-01 from it.

Asuka gasped, clasping her gloved hands over her mouth, and stared in muted horror as the Angel smashed Unit-01 against the nearest wall. She noticed that the Angel was only fighting with one arm—the second one was simply torn to shreds. Unit-01 answered by shoving an elbow into the thing's head and raking it against the launch ramps located on the opposite side of the cage, destroying them.

The two humanoid creatures fought each other with an uncanny ferocity right in front of her eyes. After a few minutes, the Angel managed to pin Unit-01 against the cage's far wall, making it bulge outwards with all that gargantuan weight. It was obvious who was winning.

As the Angel wrapped its hands around Unit-01's throat, Asuka became enraged at herself. Shinji was done for. He had come all this way, but he was beaten. Judging by the damage she saw on the Angel it must have been quite a fight.

"Asuka?" Misato's voice came to her as a desperate plea over the radio. "Help Shinji."

Asuka did not reply. All she could do was watch.

"Help him, please!"

Asuka shook her head in a combination of anger and despair, as a feeling of utter helplessness began to sink in.

"I . . . can't," she whimpered in a voice that she never knew she had. "I can't do it. I can't do anything."

"Help him!"

"I can't!" Asuka screamed and then, as if all her strength had been consumed by that action, she sank into her seat cushions. Tears of helpless rage began to flow. She sobbed, bringing up her knees and covering her face with her hand, quietly repeating that same thing to herself over and over. "I can't . . . I can't do anything . . ."

"Asuka, please, do something," Misato said, her voice beginning to break down. She was losing it. "Help him."

Asuka curled up as tightly as she could, wrapped her arms around her legs and let her head sink dejectedly between her knees. She wanted to disappear, to hide behind her controls and be swallowed by the Angel if that would finally extinguish the self-loathing and shame she felt.

I can't do anything, she repeated, while the battle raged.
I can't. I can't. I . . .

Then she heard a voice in the back of her mind.

And she wasn't in her entry-plug anymore.

The sky above her head was a rich crimson, cloudless, sunless and moonless. In fact, there was no visible light source whatsoever; the color was just there, vivid and unnatural. Below this crimson sky stretched a vast, featureless ocean of LCL, or something that resembled LCL.

It seemed to be miles deep, but only reached up to Asuka's thighs. And even through the insulating inner layer of her plugsuit, she could feel it was bitterly cold. She could not tell what she was actually standing on. Her feet must have been on a platform of some kind. No shore could be seen anywhere.

Then something moved.

Asuka looked behind her, making the LCL ripple silently. She saw there was a dead tree emerging from the endless sea, seven branches reaching into the sky like bony and twisted fingers. The tree, like her, appeared to rise out of nowhere.

Something, she couldn't tell what, drew her attention downwards, towards the LCL. The ripples crawled across her reflection. It wasn't right. Her image in the LCL was standing straight whereas she had her head down and shoulders slumped.

"Why have you forsaken your feelings to yourself?" a voice said, but not one she recognized.

No, Asuka realized. It wasn't a voice. No words were actually spoken. They were in her head. A thought rather than a sound.

"Where am I?" Asuka asked, relieved that at least she could hear herself. For what it was worth, she took that as a sign that she hadn't gone entirely insane yet. But she noticed the lips on her reflection did not move. She also noticed an expression different from that on her own face.

"This is you," the voice said again, still in her head. "And this is the place that exists between the conflicting realities of who you are. My place. Somewhere caught between your heart and your mind."

At that moment the voice changed.
It became disturbingly like her own, younger, and sharper.
A voice she hadn't heard in a long time.

"Mama! Mama, I've been chosen! I'm special!"

Asuka felt a chill, remembering the memory that those words were attached to—her mother and the doll hanging from the ceiling, the antiseptic reek of the hospital room, the tears welling up in her eyes. Just a few seconds before, she had been so happy, and then all happiness died within her.

Unlike before, when the Angel had shown this to her as it broke into her mind, Asuka wasn't forced to relive it. She remembered willingly. But why? Why was she remembering this now? Something she'd tried so hard to forget.

"She has abandoned you," the first voice said. "But I am here."

Asuka frowned, clenching her fists.
A sudden tightness came over her.

"Who the hell are you?" she whispered.

"She doesn't love you anymore. I do. I am alone, just like you.
She doesn't love you. She never did."

"Don't hate me!" Asuka's younger voice said, and even she was surprised by how high-pitched it was. It was grating, too.
She wondered if that was really how she sounded at that age.

"I don't hate you. I will not abandon you."

"Answer me!" Asuka demanded. "Who are you?"

"The end of your loneliness," the disembodied voice said.
The tone was almost comforting. "The end of everything you hate."

Asuka felt something touch her leg, inside her plugsuit right above her knee. It was warmer than the LCL around it, and it moved upwards, gently stroking her skin like fingers.

“What happened to you, Asuka? Why do you hurt so much? How long can one heart endure such pain?”

She said nothing. The fingers continued to work their way up her legs until they reached the glassy surface and then stopped. Normally, she would not permit anyone to touch her like this, but there wasn't anyone actually touching her, was there?

“The memories?” the voice whispered, almost seeming to read her mind like a book, if not her heart. “Why do they hurt you?”

“I hate them!” Asuka yelled before she could stop herself.

“What about him?” The image of Shinji Ikari appeared in her mind. “Do you hate him, too?”

There was a long silence after that. Asuka stared into her reflection, as if asking it what she should say, hoping to see the answer appear on that face. Crystal blue eyes stared back at her, showing an inquisitive glimmer. Then the answer simply appeared in her mind, and she knew it was the truth.

“No.”

“Why do you hurt him?” the voice did not sound accusing, condescending, or any of the other things Asuka thought should follow the kind of statement she'd just made. In her own heart, to admit that she didn't hate Shinji was like admitting to some lewd love affair that was best kept hidden.

“I . . .” Asuka hesitated, “I don't know. I want to hate him. Like I hate Wonder Girl. Like I hate myself. But I just . . .”

“Do you want to save him?”

Asuka shook her head, her voice breaking under the weight of all those repressed and unwanted emotions. "I can't."

"I can help him."

"How?" Asuka demanded. "You are just a stupid voice."

"I have power. Do you want my power to save him?"

"Yes!" she said instantly. "Save him! I don't care what it takes!"

"Very well. Let's do it together."

Her reflection moved below the surface, slowly bringing up its right hand and reaching it out towards Asuka. The fingertips did not breach the surface however; rather, they pressed against it as if it were made out of thin glass, like a barrier it could not get past.

Asuka understood what it wanted on such a primal level that no whispered words inside her head were necessary. She looked at her own hand, suddenly captivated by the slender, elegant fingers wrapped in black and red. It seemed all she ever did with her hands was make fists—weapons to hurt others and herself. But this time it would be different.

She reached out, towards the surface of the LCL. It rippled as she touched it. Her fingertips sank barely a centimeter, and then she felt something impossibly cold shoot through her hand and up her arm, filling her veins with freezing agony.

Asuka opened her eyes with a shocked gasp, as if she were doing it for the first time in her entire life. The cold was gone, replaced with a familiar tingling sensation. She leaned forward in her plug's command seat.

And Unit-02 pitched forward. The bindings securing it to the launch ramp groaned.

“It’s working!” Asuka called out, smiling, neither understanding nor caring to understand what had just happened.

A light had started blazing in her soul, and suddenly all the things that had made her miserable for so many months disappeared. All the problems in her life, even the darkness which perpetually threatened to consume her, burned away. They were replaced by a new feeling, one she had longed for and desired. Her smile widened.

“It’s working!” the Second Child repeated, grabbing the controls with both hands, her fingers quick and strong. She brought up a dozen different screens and checked them all in a flash. Everything was green. “Unit-02 is running nominal and ready!”

“Asuka, help Shinji!” Misato yelled.

“Save Stupid Shinji, I got it!”

The next time Asuka moved, pushing forward on her control sticks, Unit-02 effortlessly ripped off the bindings holding it back like they were made from paper and lunged its furious mass into action.

* * *

Shinji knew he was slipping out of consciousness, and that it was only a matter of time before he passed out. The pain was overwhelming; it intruded into every part of his body, raking his muscles into spasms. Everything was blurred. He could hear the voices fighting again in his head, just as he did every time he closed his eyes, and could no longer tell if they were on the radio or somewhere in his mind.

The Angel was looking at him, its red eyes glowing from among the bloodied mass that was the head to which they belonged. Something was wrong in his chest—every breath burned like fire. He couldn't move his arm anymore.

And all the while the counter on his HUD ticked down to zero. Nobody knew for sure what would happen after that. If he made it that long, that was. Shinji didn't think that he would.

But just as he was ready to welcome the darkness, a red arm wrapped itself around the white neck in front of him. Red and orange. Only one person was associated with those colors in his mind.

Red and orange meant . . .

His vision clouded, consciousness fading, the Third Child looked over the Angel's shoulder just in time to see Unit-02 place a chokehold around its neck.

Asuka, you made it, he thought weakly, before his world faded to endless black. The pain finally stopped.

* * *

"Get away from him!" Asuka squeezed the Angel's neck with all her strength, trying to pull it away from Unit-01 and hearing the vertebrae cracking. "I won't let you hurt him anymore!"

The Angel wailed, leaning forward even as Asuka jerked back. Every muscle in her slender body strained and pulled. Wailing became strangled gurgling, followed by the distinctive crunching snap of bone. It was like music to Asuka's ears; seldom had anything sounded so sweet. The Angel went limp.

Asuka had to fight to keep a grin from her face. Now was not the time for smiling. She tore the Angel away from Unit-01 and smashed it forcefully against a nearby wall. The thing collapsed in a bloody heap, twitching and issuing a horrific screech. Asuka began bashing it, raining blows down with her fists and, eventually, kicking it wildly. With its neck now broken, its body mauled, it could do very little to defend itself.

“DIE!”

With a powerful blow, she punched its head so hard it exploded into a fountain of blood, muscle and tissue, like a watermelon full of gore. Red eyes popped loose from their crushed sockets, bouncing on tendons and optical nerves.

Even then she didn't stop. She was enjoying herself now, a vicious grin on her face. And when she could not bash it against anything else, she threw it down and began stomping on it with her feet. The whole time she bellowed like an angry lion.

“DIE! DIE! DIE!”

Screaming, Asuka grabbed the Angel by the neck and proceeded to repeatedly hammer its head against everything she could find—bulkheads, walls, steel beams, chunks of fallen concrete, metal rails, dented flooring. It all became her weapon.





“Major Katsuragi, deactivate Unit-01 while we still have time,” Gendo Ikari commanded from his perch. His voice was steady, his face hard. There was no emotion in either.
“Unit-02 will take care of the rest of this operation.”

“Yes, sir.” Misato nodded weakly.
She gave Hyuga an exhausted glance. “How much power left?”

“16 seconds,” Hyuga answered dutifully, lifting his head with some effort.

Misato realized he must have been exhausted, even if he was perhaps too much of a professional to show it openly. When this was over she would have to find a way to thank him, and some of the others on the bridge crew as well.

“Begin de-activation procedures,” Ritsuko said.
“Emergency steps only.”

The small cadre of technicians went to work, hands moving over consoles, fingers turning switches. Screens flashed. Numbers ticked down. Misato left them to it, and began turning her attention back to the battle.

“Major, I’m picking up a high density energy pattern,” Hyuga said suddenly. “The energy is accumulating on itself. It looks like the Angel may be attempting some sort of self-destruct attack.”

“If that thing goes it’ll destroy Central Dogma,” Aoba said from his station across the computer bank. “The resulting explosion could collapse the Geo-Front as well. We wouldn’t survive.”

Misato sighed. It was just unbelievable. They finally had the Angel down, about to be destroyed, after a brutal combat, and now it was trying to kill them all even while it died? Some giant monsters should just know when to take the loss.

“Asuka, can you hear me?” She called over the communication system, knowing an audio channel had been left open when Unit-02 activated and the long-range bridge microphones would pick up her words. “Asuka?”

It took a moment but the redhead finally replied, her voice shrill and put-upon. “I’m a little busy right now, in case you haven’t noticed!”

Same old haughty Asuka, Misato thought to herself. Well, at least she’s talking again.

Nobody understood what just happened with Asuka and Unit-02—even Ritsuko was at a loss—but it was nothing short of a miracle. Shinji had been defeated, and might have suffered some serious injuries in the process. There was still no word from Rei. Only Asuka had been left in the fight. And if she’d been a few seconds late ...

“The Angel’s going to self-destruct,” Misato said, and surprised herself by how calm and controlled she sounded despite the grim weariness she felt. “It looks like it will use its energy blast thing and take us out. You have to kill it fast.”

“How much time?” Asuka asked in a hurried groan.

“How long?” Misato checked with Hyuga. When in doubt, always check with Hyuga. “And give me a countdown.”

“The energy concentration has surpassed our safety levels. MAGI estimates ... 35 seconds before the critical threshold,”

the operator said very fast. A ticking clock appeared on the main display, counting down in red numbers. "At such close range it will destroy almost everything in—"

"35 seconds!" Asuka interrupted before Misato could relay. "Got it!"

"If you can't stop it when it reaches 10, place it on the launch ramp," Misato said. "We'll eject it to the outside. It will be bad when it detonates but maybe we'll live."

Asuka's reply came as a roar.

* * *

This time Asuka didn't waste a second. As soon as the Angel hit the ground from her latest body slam, she pinned it with her knees and ripped open its chest with the progressive knife she had taken from Unit-02's shoulder a split second before.

And then the core was left exposed.

Releasing a single scream filled with all the anger and hatred she'd bottled up over the past months, Asuka buried the vibrating knife into the dark blood-colored sphere that was the Angel's core. It did not collapse as she had expected. Instead, the knife's sonic waves began to spark on contact with the core's hardened molecules. But still the edge didn't penetrate. Asuka pressed the knife harder, shifting her body forward to place more of Unit-02's weight on the blade.

"Die already, dammit!" she screamed. "Go to Hell!"

The sparks flared into a raging fire, quickly burning the Eva's hands. Asuka pushed aside the pain,

transmitted to her own hands by the nerve connection with Unit-02, and placed all her strength on the progressive knife. She held it so tightly that her knuckles began to hurt, the handle cutting into her palms.

“Fifteen seconds,” Misato called out unnecessarily. Asuka could see the clock displayed in front of her.

The Second Child leaned her body fully forward so that she was practically bent over on her seat, pushing as hard as she could on her control yokes. Now the entire weight of the Eva was placed on the knife. It would either cut through the core or break the blade.

“Ten. Asuka, get rid of it. We’ll launch it to the outside”

“NO!” Asuka yelled, shaking her head and gritting her teeth. “It’s mine!” she growled. “I will kill it!”

“It’s not worth the danger, Asuka!”

“Four!” Asuka began counting to herself, pushing desperately on the control yokes, trying to transfer as much of her own strength through the Eva. Her pretty face twisted into a vicious snarl, blue eyes filled with fury. She was more a warrior blinded by bloodlust than a teenage girl now, a beast in her own right. Anger drove her. Hate. Pain. “Three, come on!”

“Please, Asuka, you don’t have to sacrifice everyone’s lives for your—”

“Two!”

The core began to crack.

Asuka pushed the knife deeper into the sphere, hoping, praying she would not die with it. But as she counted the final number in her mind, she squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the end,

only vaguely aware that she might have just killed everyone who had ever shown her kindness since coming to Japan.

“One!”

The explosion she expected never came. Instead there was silence, interrupted only by the buzzing sound of the knife’s sonic blade.

Silence.

The core imploded in a bubbling tsunami of blood. A moment later, the progressive knife snapped and shattered.

Slowly, Asuka opened her eyes again. She peered outside cautiously, and then every muscle of her body relaxed as she realized that the Angel’s core had been utterly crushed. Unit-02’s hands smoldered, but other than that it sustained little damage. Her own hands were stinging badly, nothing she couldn’t deal with.

“The energy concentration is dissipating,” Hyuga reported in her ear. “Target has gone dark.”

“It’s dead,” Misato added. Her voice sounded rather odd, tired. Some distant clapping and cheering could be heard in the background through the open channel.

“That was too damn reckless, but you did it. You killed the Angel.”

Asuka was stunned for a moment.

“I . . . did it.”

Little by little, the words sank in, and once they did the Second Child found herself smiling. Bright hot pride blossomed within her like it hadn’t in months. It felt good. She glanced to her right, towards Unit-01.

“I did it!” she repeated. “Stupid Shinji, did you hear? I killed—”

Something cold and painful stabbed inside Asuka's chest, close to her heart. Her pride rapidly turned into worry. The smile faded.

Oh no. Was I too late after all?

Unit-01 lay slumped motionless several hundred feet away amidst the rubble piles, crumbled concrete blocks, electric cables, bent steel beams and other assorted debris from the holding cage structure. With its armor heavily battered and covered in countless dents and scrapes, the purple Evangelion looked as dead as the Angel.

Some of the steel twisted around it like a giant hand, while the wall directly behind had buckled outward from the weight and pressure placed on it. A little more damage, perhaps even just one or two blows removing a few supports, and that entire section might have collapsed right on their heads. Yet despite the magnitude, such massive physical destruction was secondary. At the center of all that, locked inside his entry-plug, was a human being.

"What about Shinji?" Asuka asked, resisting the urge to move closer. He couldn't be seriously hurt. He just couldn't. If he was . . . the possibility made her feel like screaming.

"He's unconscious," Hyuga answered before her swirling emotions could spill over. "We are sending a medical team now. Unit-01 was deactivated just before it could run out of battery as a precaution. Shinji was already out when it happened."

"Are you sure?" Asuka insisted. "Maybe he—"

"We had his telemetry right until shutdown, and the internal life support is fully functional. There's no reason to think his status has changed. The medical team will confirm once they enter the entry-plug. Please return to your stand-by position in the meantime."

“Understood.”

Straightening up, Asuka moved Unit-02 away from the defeated Angel crumpled like a broken skeleton at her feet, though only after kicking it one last time for good measure. The monstrous corpse jiggled for a couple of seconds then lay inert once more, its remaining wing extended towards the ceiling.

Less than a minute later, a retrieval crew of six entered the cage through an emergency hatchway and began making their way through the rubble towards Unit-01. All wore hazmat suits. They were soon followed by a larger contingent of technicians in orange coveralls, brown boots and white hardhats.

Asuka watched the crews move around. Then, as the leading elements vanished behind the nearest concrete pile, she looked down at her own plugsuited body.

I'm piloting the Eva again, she thought. It's just like it said.

Whatever IT happened to be. Asuka didn't understand. Had she been hallucinating after hitting her head when the cage's ceiling collapsed on top of her? No, that couldn't be right. It didn't feel right. The images and sounds had all been so real, like some kind of lucid dream that turned out not to be a dream; a technological miracle shaping her deepest desire, to pilot the Eva again, into reality.

Asuka pulled at her control sticks and Unit-02 moved its arm accordingly. She held her hands in front, palms turned up. They burned from the heat caused by the progressive knife, but the fact that she could feel this pain was, ironically, a positive sign. Her connection was solid. The Eva's hands were her hands. Like it should be.

“It really works,” Asuka told herself, not caring if Misato or anyone else was listening. “Mama, are you watching? It works. My Unit-02.”

“Did you say something?” Misato asked with noticeable concern, whatever ill feelings towards the disobedient recklessness of a moment before forgotten or delayed until she could offer a proper scolding in private rather than over an open channel.

“Are you feeling alright? Are you injured?”

“I’m fine,” Asuka replied, then added in a more haughty tone, “Of course I’m fine. I beat the Angel. Why wouldn’t I be?”

The question seemed like a stupid one at first glance, but as she returned to Unit-02’s holding cradle along the cage wall, Asuka suddenly had the strange sense that something was very wrong. And the more she moved the more she noticed this sensation. Something was off all around her, as if the LCL itself had become heavier and colder than usual.

Thinking quickly, she checked the base settings on the central console between her knees and saw the temperature was the same she always kept by default. LCL Oxygenation was also normal. The filters were all working. Her plugsuit sensors showed green. Nothing had physically changed. But ...

She raised her hand again, flexed her fingers. The image of a black tree rising from an endless ocean came to her mind. Words promising help. An alien touch through her plugsuit.

Asuka focused, trying to recall old emotions and memories so distant they seemed like they belonged to someone else, and she remembered that before, whenever she successfully synched with her Eva, she’d had the faint but soothing impression that something had been in there with her, watching over her, even protecting her.

Now it was gone.

As soon as she realized this, Asuka felt a deep sense of loss take hold in her heart, both powerful and confusing. It was like some important gift had slipped unseen through her outstretched fingers before she'd ever known what it was or that she had it in the first place. Like a missing childhood companion who left only the silence and gloom of the entry-plug in their absence.

But Asuka had long since grown used to losing things, and she was familiar with the dull, lingering ache and painful regret that came with it. Her whole life was knotted up by those feelings.

Perhaps because of this, among other reasons, she found it surprisingly easy to push back. What even was there for her to feel badly about? She won the battle and lost nothing. Shinji was being recovered. Unit-02 worked again. Her precious, beautiful Unit-02. Her pride and joy. If she could have it, then she didn't need anything else. She didn't need anyone. Just as she always wished.

Finding some comfort in that thought, the Second Child settled back into her seat, nuzzling her slender body against the cushions. This was where she belonged; this was home. And she hoped that if she kept telling herself that, it might feel less empty.





She was hurting. Even in her head, floating somewhere in the blank abyss between consciousness and unconsciousness, she was hurting. It wasn't just neurological pain, either. Not merely electrical impulses shooting up her spine and into her brain. No, that kind of pain stopped. This pain went deeper, like it was a part of her soul.

At first the pain was like a haze, everywhere at once, a red mist. But then at some point amidst the nothingness, it became condensed into tiny clusters, gathering nerves and neurons into searing spots of glowing flame. The brightness spread across the abyss, burning as it went, like a tide of ejected gas from a dying star.

Slowly, the abyss became shallower and shallower. Slowly, the star turned night into day. And slowly, Rei Ayanami opened her eyes. The blue sky was above her, white clouds drifting lazily.

I'm alive.

The moment the thought formed in her head, Rei felt sick. She rolled onto her side and heaved. Her stomach was empty; there was nothing left to retch besides bile and saliva. It still hurt. Her red eyes squeezed shut as she clutched the ground with a gloved hand, leaving small trenches where her fingers dug into the soil.

Eventually, the sickness passed. Rei collapsed onto her back, gasping in agony. She realized she was lying on a stretcher somewhere outside her entry-plug. An IV line was in her right wrist. She stared at it, but couldn't move her arm or flex her fingers. It was the same arm she'd felt the Angel rip off.

The Angel ... it ... had spoken to her. She tried to remember. The words which came to her were a soft, soothing whisper,

and it took her a moment to recognize them as real words from a real person. Rei looked up.

There was a girl kneeling beside her, holding the IV bag in her hands. She wore the tan uniform of NERV, her blond hair was so disheveled it resembled an old cleaning mop.

Dirt and grime caked her skin.

Rei heard the whisper again. The girl was talking. “—move. You’ll be fine now. Help is coming.”

“Angel ...” Rei croaked, her throat scratchy and dry. She made an effort to sit. “Where ...”

“It’s dead,” the girl said. “Lieutenant Ibuki has been in contact with Central Dogma. The Second Child killed it in the main cage. It’s over. Now, please. You are badly hurt.” She placed a hand on Rei’s shoulder and slowly eased her back to the stretcher. “You shouldn’t move.”

Despite the deliberate gentleness of the touch, pain shot through her like a hot knife.

“... hurts ...”

“Sorry.” The girl said. She stifled a sob. “I’m sorry. We used up all the morphine. When we pulled you out of the entry-plug ... you were in so much pain. You wouldn’t stop screaming. But it’s okay. You’re safe. We won.”

She took Rei’s hand and held it tightly. Human contact—soothing, warm, completely unlike what synching to her Eva felt like, and unlike everything she had just experienced. It was a welcome reminder that she was still alive.

Rei would have thanked her, if she had remained conscious long enough.





On the observation deck, Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki hung up the phone and returned the handset to its cradle beside his console. Retrieval operations were still ongoing, and would be for quite some time, but a general calm had fallen over the bridge.

“Lieutenant Ibuki has recovered the First Child,” he reported, turning his head towards the only man who shared the upper deck with him. “It seems the day belongs to us after all.”

“Indeed it does,” Ikari replied. His expression remained unreadable as he stood up from his desk. “Unit-02 came through for us at the last moment. The start-up program did what it was supposed to in the end.”

Fuyutsuki nodded grimly. “Now we must wait to see what price will be extracted from us in exchange for our victory,” he said. “The start-up program in Unit-02’s coding is a double-edged sword. As you are well aware.”

“It is what it is,” Ikari said. “It still came too close for comfort. I would have preferred not to expose Unit-01 to any possible contamination from the Angel, but the way things turned out seem to justify our actions.”

Fuyutsuki was not so sure.

“Not everything worked out in our favor, however. Unit-00 was demolished and the damage to the Geo-Front and Central Dogma is enormous,” the Sub-Commander pointed out. “It will take months to repair.”

“Those issues can be resolved with time and money. We have gained both. I don’t intend to get Unit-00 back in combat condition.

Now that we know that it works, Unit-02 should be more than enough to deal with any future threat. And we can always improvise.”

Second-guessing was not in Fuyutsuki’s nature, but things like this made him wonder. He’d known Ikari long enough to know the man was neither impatient nor reckless, and that was the one thing that kept any possibility of disagreement in check.

In the end, he trusted that Ikari was at least aware of the consequences of his actions.

“Unit-02 could become very unstable,” was all he said, and in truth that was all that needed to be said.

Doctor Akagi had done a thorough job in her analysis already.

“I am not concerned as long as we can control Unit-02. When the time comes it will help us deal with our greatest foe. I am more interested in the events that will now take place in the world. As you can imagine, with the threat of more Angels, I expect NERV will regain preeminence in the most influential circles. We have made ourselves essential once again to the world’s defense.”

“You mean NERV will be untouchable again,” Fuyutsuki said. That had always been a critical part of their survival. The only way to justify the enormous expense which NERV entailed was that it simply had to exist because there was no other option. After the events of the day, they could hardly have asked for more.

“Indeed. Your perception serves you well. SEELE will not like it, but I expect there will be little they can do. Even the world’s greatest evil must be tolerated if it is necessary. Let the crew celebrate if they wish. As for you, Professor, please see to that government matter we discussed previously.”

“It will take a few days to arrange things, given our last reports,” Fuyutsuki said.

Ikari placed a hand in his pocket and walked mechanically towards the exit, using the door for a change. He did not provide a reply, and in reality, he hardly needed to. Fuyutsuki already knew that Ikari would simply tell him to get it done.

And so, he would.



It must have been well past noon now and the look on Asuka's face had only gotten more sour.

Under normal circumstances, Shinji would have been perfectly fine waiting as long as it took to get inside Rei's hospital room, but there was never anything normal when his fellow pilot was around. He hadn't expected to see her today, or really any other day, and much less that she'd agree to have lunch with Misato and him. When he asked if he could see Rei before eating, however, her mood quickly took a turn for the worse.

Since he couldn't stand for any significant period, Shinji had quietly taken a seat on the bench closest to the door, dressed in a loose gray gown and slippers. His forehead was wrapped in bandages, his battered arm in a sling, and even though the pain in chest had subsided it was extremely sore when he breathed. Aside from other minor scrapes and bumps, he'd also come away with a concussion, bruised ribs, and a dislocated shoulder.

Asuka, on the other hand, had gone completely unscathed save for a few burns on her fingers and the palms of her hands. She stood beyond the end of the bench, opposite Misato, leaning against the wall with her arms folded over her chest. She was clad in her school uniform, golden-red hair pinned up as usual by her neural connectors.

Shinji tried to avoid looking at her too much, though he wanted to. Being in the hospital meant having lots of time and nothing to do, and he'd spent a lot of it thinking about what he would say to her when he saw her. Now that she was there, he couldn't remember half the stuff he'd thought about, and he didn't dare say the other half. Asuka herself hadn't said much, and even Misato seemed determined to stay out of their way.

With how things stood, Shinji would happily settle for lunch together. It was a start, and perhaps a chance at regaining some normalcy after ... the Angel.

She saved us, Shinji thought. She saved me.

No one had bothered explaining how Asuka had activated Unit-02 again. The current general consensus seemed to be that whatever happened, it did so just in the nick of time. Shinji agreed. A few seconds later and there was little doubt in his mind the Angel would have won. He'd already been beaten unconscious. They needed a miracle. And with Unit-02 they got one.

Almost as if beckoned by his thoughts, Asuka sighed loudly. "How much longer is this gonna take?" she complained. Her voice was low and oddly restrained, like she was trying not to sound whiny. She still failed. "Come on. I'm hungry."

"It's not nice to be impatient, Asuka," Misato replied in the most commanding voice she could muster at the moment, which was really not very commanding. She was in her red jacket, with her arms wrapped around her waist. "I promise I will take you to lunch afterwards."

"You already promised we'd go to lunch," Asuka said, glaring. "That's why I came. But that was before you sprang this on me. If I had known I would have to stand around some depressing hallway all day, I would have met you later in the cafeteria."

“You’ll get your food anyway. What’s the problem?”

Asuka’s scowl deepened. “My problem? You said this would only take a few minutes, and we’ve been here like . . .” She checked her watch, “ . . . over an hour now. You tricked me!”

“I did no such thing.” Misato shook her head. She stepped towards the redhead. “Time is not important anyway. I already signed the permission slip, so you don’t have to go back to school this afternoon. And besides, aren’t you at least a little concerned for Rei?”

“No,” Asuka said without missing a beat.

“Well, I am concerned,” Misato began, her voice stern. “You bet I am. Rei risked her life for us. All of us. Even for you.” She pointed a finger in Shinji’s direction. “And he is concerned too. That means we’ve got you at a disadvantage. Isn’t that right, Shinji?”

Shinji remained silent. Asuka’s dislike for Rei was nothing new, but he wished she could be less dismissive about her well-being. Having gone through so much herself, he’d expect even someone like her would be able to understand that it was normal for people to worry about each other. And if it had been her in Rei’s condition, he would be worried just the same. But he wasn’t going to say anything. He didn’t want to screw up again by opening his mouth.

“I don’t care,” Asuka said.

“Screw democracy then,” Misato said angrily. “I’m paying for lunch, so I hold all the cards. We are here to check on Rei. Period.”

“Wonder Girl must feel like she is the most popular girl in the world,” Asuka replied, her tone turning noticeably sour. “Pathetic.”

“Keep it up and you’ll have to pay for your own food, and eat it alone.”

“Why can’t you just come back later?” Asuka grumbled.
“Without me. The doll isn’t going anywhere.”

“Asuka, I swear, if you start with that shit—” Misato snapped, seemingly very close to losing her patience now. She raised a hand, but stopped short of actually voicing a threat or acting on her anger.

Asuka quickly fell silent, and her expression flashed uncertainty for a second, as if trying to decide whether Misato would strike her or not. Then she turned up her nose and stuck out her chin with all the haughtiness of a child defying a parent.

“Sorry.” Misato shook her head. She backed away from Asuka. “I didn’t mean to shout. Everyone is still on edge after the battle, myself included.”

“That’s not an excuse!” Asuka began, her voice rising. She pushed off the wall and stepped towards Misato. “You all defend her because what, you think she’s too weak to stand up for herself? Or because she went and got hurt? Well, I’ve been through just as much pain as her. I risked my life too. But no one ever defends me!”

“Asuka, it’s not like that—” Misato started, but Asuka cut her short.

“Why do we have to be here? Why do I have to care?
When I was in the hospital, nobody came to see me.
Not you. Not Shinji. Not even Ritsuko. Nobody cared.
So why should I care for Rei?”

“Asuka ...”

“It’s the truth and you damn well know it!”

She wasn’t wrong, Shinji recognized, but the issue was far more complicated and personal than any of Asuka’s bitter accusations could convey. When the 15th Angel attacked her mind, he tried showing her sympathy precisely because he cared about her.

Asuka responded with vitriol and hurtful words—a reaction which represented the rule rather than the exception in their relationship. Then everything came crashing down so quickly he scarcely knew what was happening. By the time he managed to catch his breath, she had been sent to the hospital. And then, after she returned, he'd told her that he hated her and made her cry.

Regardless of how much he wished it, he knew he couldn't change the past nor heal the injuries he had inflicted through ignorance and anger. And what would be the point anyway? Asuka was still Asuka. She would never surrender her pride for a chance to fix their mistakes with each other. That left him with few options beyond merely keeping his distance. He simply had no idea how else he could deal with her, how to make her feel better, how to ask anything from her—even a tiny bit of compassion for someone like Rei.

Apparently, Misato didn't know either.

Shinji was relieved to see his guardian turn her head away and swallow her response. The worst possible thing she could do was argue with Asuka when she got angry like this. It was safer to let it go and hope she'd cool off on her own.

Deprived of her chance to lash out like she obviously wanted, Asuka groaned with frustration and started walking down the hallway in a huff, her gait wide and strong, hands clenched into fists.

"Hey, hold on," Misato called out. "Where are you going?"

"To find a vending machine," Asuka said, without looking back. "Call me when you are done with your pity party."

"Don't go too far!" Misato said as Asuka vanished around the corner. Then she turned to Shinji once again. "God, sometimes I wish she would just shut up and listen. She's pretty but that alone won't get her far in life with that mouth of hers ..."

Shinji heaved a heavy sigh and dropped his gaze to the floor. As Misato was getting ready to say something more, the door to Rei's hospital room slid open and Dr. Ritsuko Akagi emerged, holding a clipboard and a cup filled with a yellow liquid. Misato immediately approached her. She made little effort to conceal her concern.

"How's Rei?" she asked.

"Not ready for visitors, I'm afraid," Ritsuko said bluntly. She turned to look at Shinji. "Sorry, but you'd do more harm than good. I'm certain you wouldn't want that, would you?"

"It's been four days, Ritsuko," Misato said.
"Surely a few minutes won't hurt."

"Her injuries were quite serious, even if they are not life-threatening," Ritsuko said, still addressing Shinji instead of Misato. "It could have been much worse. She will not be awake for several more hours. Perhaps tomorrow or the day after. You won't be able to speak with her until then."

"He can see her. He doesn't need to speak to her," Misato insisted, but Ritsuko shook her head.

"That wouldn't be advisable," the doctor said.

"It's ... it's fine," Shinji finally said, his voice low and throaty. "I just thought ... I haven't heard anything since the battle. And I know she's ... different. But Rei is—"

"She's alive," Ritsuko said. "She may even recover. Be glad for that."

Shinji would have liked to, but he couldn't. Instead, he felt a rising sense of hopelessness. He wasn't sure why he'd expected anything different. Sometimes he truly seemed to forget what this place was, and who he was surrounded by.

He stood up slowly, his body aching in half a dozen places as he moved, his head hanging low and heavy. Saying nothing, he began heading down the hallway.

“Shinji, wait,” Misato said before he could take more than a few steps. She took him by the sleeve, but didn’t pull on him. “We’re supposed to have lunch with Asuka. She’s going to be angry if you don’t come—ah, well, angrier—and I bet you must be tired of the hospital junk by now. Some real food would be nice, don’t you think?”

“The food is adequate for the patient’s needs, Misato. It’s certainly not junk.” Ritsuko frowned sternly. “Besides, Shinji’s not supposed to leave the ward. We still have tests to run, and in any case he should be under observation. Both Unit-01 and his body received considerable damage.”

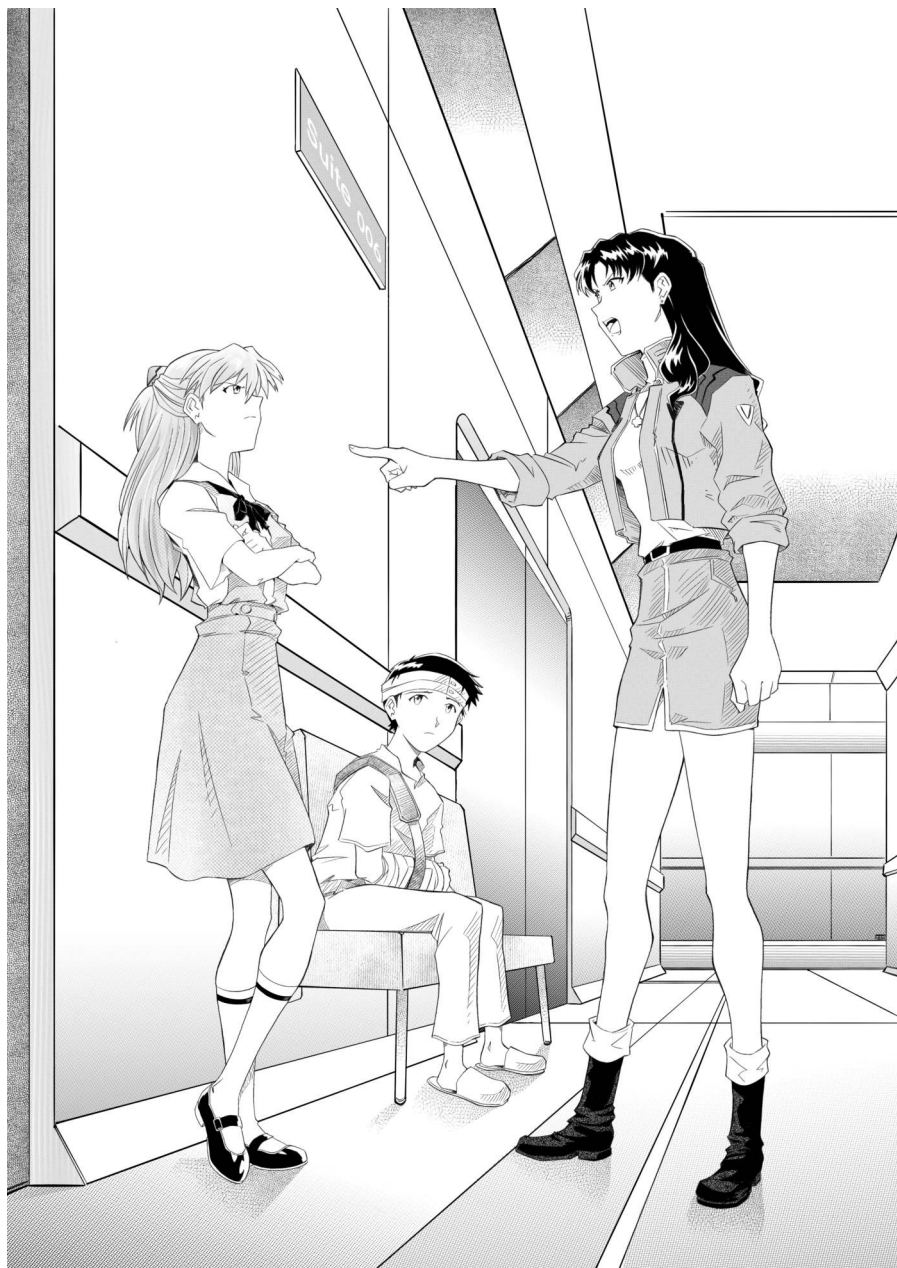
“He’ll be with me.” Misato pointed at herself. “I can observe.”

“Are you trying to convince me?” Ritsuko looked skeptical. “You’re hardly the most responsible person. I might even call you naive, if not downright reckless.”

“Geez, thanks for the vote of confidence,” Misato responded. “I assure you this is one of those cases where I prefer being responsible if it benefits him.”

“Rest would benefit him much more. We’ll bring him food.” Ritsuko stepped over to Shinji. She tucked the clipboard under her arm and placed a hand gently on his shoulder. He didn’t look up at her. “Come on,” she said. “I’ll see you to your room.”

Shinji did not resist as she led him away, his footsteps quiet in the hall next to the clicking of her heels. He was aware of Misato watching them go, biting her lower lip in disapproval. Then she sighed and gave him up.



* * *

The sign read:

TERMINAL DOGMA
MEGA-DEPTH FACILITY
CODE 1 AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED

Junichi Nakajima had already lost track of how many thousands of meters below the surface they had descended. At a guess—both judging by the length of their trip and the noticeable changes in ambient pressure which made his ears pop—he would estimate it was at least a kilometer or more. And there must have been another three or four hundred meters down a long, dark corridor before he found himself in front of an enormous metal door with the sign beside it.

The agent shifted his weight uncomfortably on his feet. His injured arm, now confined in a sling, hurt. Every time he moved his shoulder screamed in pain. He wasn't sure if he should simply be glad to be alive or if he should have tried to escape. However, one thing was certain: Gendo Ikari wouldn't have called for him unless he had something important to say.

It certainly couldn't go any worse than his last meeting with Kluge. The fact that he still had a job was astounding. Even this lovely trip to the bowels of Tartarus itself could only end, at worst, with him being shot. Again.

The ride on the elevator had taken more than half an hour, and it was one of those big express elevators, like those used on skyscrapers. Oddly enough, during that time Gendo Ikari, along with his gray-haired Sub-Commander, had remained very quiet.

Finally, after another half hour or so of walking around, they had come upon this large corridor lit only by dim lights in the ceiling. There were no guards anywhere, which seemed strange.

Ikari stopped by the door, adorned with the NERV fig leaf, and carefully studied the access panel on its side.

“What is this place?” Nakajima asked, unsure of what to say. His voice sounded awkward, and he couldn’t help noticing that despite all the space, it carried no echo. There must have been some kind of sound-proofing in the walls. Why that might be needed was anyone’s guess.

“Heaven’s Gate,” Ikari said. “Many people have died for just a glimpse of what you are about to see.” He typed the entry code and pulled a security card from his jacket pocket.

The doors beeped and opened.

“Oh, my God,” was all Nakajima could come up with.

In front of him was a large cavern, so big that most of it was covered in darkness. In the center of the cavern, he saw a huge red cross, and . . . something nailed to it. Something as big as the Evas. But so much more macabre. It was white all over, nailed by its outstretched hands to the cross, and with no face. Instead, it wore a mask on which was carved an inverted triangle and seven eyes. And it sent a shiver up his spine.

“This is the source of everything since the Second Impact,” Ikari said, seemingly addressing the darkness itself.

“The reason for the existence of NERV.

This is the truth that they have been hiding from you.”

Then he turned to Nakajima who didn't even notice, because he was staring at the thing, frozen. His mouth hung open, eyes unblinking.

"Second Impact?" Nakajima murmured incredulously. "You can't be serious."

Ikari nodded. "I am. Whether you believe it or not is irrelevant. This is the technology they used to trigger Second Impact, our doom and salvation at one. We copied from this. We did not create it. Perhaps not even SEELE did because if they had, they would not be looking for this one. Have you ever heard that name?"

Nakajima tried to recall. The word seemed strangely familiar. "I think perhaps in a file somewhere. A name? An organization? Some computer system?"

"Consider yourself fortunate," Ikari said. "If I had to describe it as anything, I would suggest ... a presence."

"Men?" Nakajima suggested.

"Dangerous men," Ikari said grimly. "Maybe the most dangerous group of men who ever lived. Enough to make Musashi Kluge seem like a mouse."

The idea made the government agent feel nauseous with fear. Half the things that were rumored about Chief Kluge would be enough to ... and these SEELE men were worse? Gendo Ikari surely would not make such a claim lightly.

Nakajima didn't understand. He didn't know where to start or what to think. This thing ... What the hell was this thing? And what could this SEELE want with it? Three billion people died during Second Impact. How could the cause be standing right there?

For all the questions which came to mind, however, only one really mattered.

“Why are you showing me this?”

“Like I said, many people have died for this. But some knew about it from the beginning. Studied it. Worked with it. And some hoped that it would one day lead to a new future for mankind. Your father was among the latter.”

The image of his father appeared in his head, stern and unyielding. He had not seen the man since joining the military. When he was young and stupid.

“How do you know about my father?” Nakajima asked, finally tearing his eyes off the thing and focusing them on Ikari. The man stood like a stone golem, hands in his pockets, his own eyes hidden behind his glasses.

“I knew him,” Ikari said slowly. “We were in Antarctica together before it happened. He and Katsuragi had high hopes for their discovery. The rest of us were not so sure. We knew those in power would not let such a chance slip.”

“Katsuragi?”

“The sins of the father,” Ikari said, “always return to haunt the children. But your father was a good man. A man of convictions. If he knew what those he trusted have done with his life’s work . . .” he paused. His lips twisted into something like a smirk. “With a name like yours, I wonder how you have lasted this long.”

“I believe Special Agent Kaji Ryoji got me recommended to the Ministry of the Interior. Certainly, someone had to pull some strings or I would have never made it in,” Nakajima confessed, not really knowing why.

"I also believe he might have gotten me through the screening process. To be frank, I don't know what he was thinking. We knew each other from the JSSDF when they stopped being all about self-defense. From Sepang. I think he felt he had to look after me. Kluge came to me after that."

"So, you are here to seek the truth for yourself, like Ryoji did?" Ikari said. "Or are you here to snoop for your masters?"

"Neither," Nakajima smiled weakly. "I was sent here because somebody thought it was a good idea. Kluge said he didn't have a choice. Before he shot me. I didn't come here because I wanted to, I can promise you that. The Chief—"

"Interesting," Fuyutsuki said from behind. "You do the bidding of others but claim to have no interest yourself?"

"Why would I?" Nakajima said. "The relationship between the government and NERV boils down to a simple oversight operation. I didn't know what it was really about."

"And now you do know," Fuyutsuki said calmly. "Part of the truth. The real truth."

Nakajima turned around and stared at the creature once again.

"So, this is what killed him?" the agent asked himself. Suddenly another sound filled the air. He recognized the unmistakable click of a gun's safety being removed. Nakajima turned back to find the white-haired Sub-Commander holding a gun to his head.

"I must apologize for this," the older man said, with real remorse in his professorial voice. "I hate the brutish simplicity of guns. Such harsh devices leave no room for intelligent discourse."

But fate makes puppets of us all, and thus I must play my part.
With great regret, I assure you.”

Nakajima could have laughed. What did it matter?
A bullet was a bullet. Fate had nothing to do with it.

“You must be very proud of your father,” Ikari said, suddenly.
He moved closer, still keeping his hands in his pockets. Nakajima
wondered if he might also be holding a gun.

“Why do you say that?” he whispered, shaking his head.

“Because if I had thought of him as a lesser man, I would have
killed you when you first showed up,” Ikari said. “But a man leaves a
legacy in his son. And I had enough respect for that legacy to wait
and see how his son would develop. I was not disappointed.”

Nakajima suppressed an ironic smirk.
“And yet here you are, pointing a gun at my head.”

“A necessary precaution,” Fuyutsuki explained. “For which I have
already asked forgiveness. I’m sure you understand.”

“I’m not a threat to you. Chief Kluge saw to that.” Nakajima lifted
his injured shoulder. It sent a spike of pain through him. “I don’t
even have a gun anymore.”

“The fact that he did not kill you but still chose to hurt you means
he does consider you a threat on some level.
Otherwise, he would have simply dismissed you and sent you back.
At the very least it points to him considering that you needed ...
a lesson. In any case, it’s only a matter of time.
You won’t last on your own,” Ikari said. “Luckily, I do not believe in
wasting people as long as they are useful to me. And you,
placed within the hierarchy of the Japanese government,
are in a unique position to be particularly useful.”

“My own boss shot me,” Nakajima said, narrowing his eyes. “I don’t think I’ll be working for the government much longer.”

“NERV has recently come into a lot of influence, as you might have heard. We no longer need a government liaison, but the position was a mutually-agreed-upon decision designed to show our willingness to cooperate. As such, it cannot be removed if NERV requests that you stay. And if I request you personally, you will not be going anywhere.”

“Do you mean . . . work for you?” Nakajima hesitated. “And if I refuse?”

“Are you under the impression that we are bargaining?” Ikari pointed to Nakajima’s injured shoulder. “The people who did that to you are the same people who killed your father. I did not expect that you would help me out of the kindness of your heart. No. I will give you something in return.”

“I am not after revenge.” Nakajima studied him, trying to determine his motives, and found that he might as well have been trying to read Lucifer himself. Ikari’s face was perfectly calm, not betraying a hint of emotion or anything else that might allow him to gauge the man’s sincerity. Still, he was not the one who’d shot him for doing what he thought was his job.

And it was tempting. He couldn’t deny that. With NERV by his side, he could cause a lot of trouble for Kluge and the Ministry.

“Justice, then,” Ikari corrected. “For him, and for yourself. You have spent your entire life hating your father, but you don’t even know what he achieved. And what you think you do know is wrong. Lies meant to hide the truth. You must at least be curious.”

“So, what is the truth?” Nakajima asked. The white monster loomed above him, like a wicked savior on its iron cross.

The featureless steel face gleamed in the scant lighting, its gigantic pale body bloated grotesquely, seemingly almost without shape in places. A thing of nightmares. It was beyond farcical that so much pain and power could have their origins in something like this.

Ikari waited, letting the sight do his job for him with incredible effectiveness. Nakajima had almost given up on any response and was expecting to get the bullet when NERV's Supreme Commander finally spoke again.

"That noble men attempted to save the world and were destroyed for it," Ikari said. "That any lie can become truth if it is large enough and repeated often. In such ways things are built. That is how humans make the future. By building on hidden foundations of deceit. What you see before you is the mother of lies, and thus the most powerful source of truth. The weapon of retribution for us—for every one of us. Yourself included, should you choose to cooperate."

Nakajima had already made up his mind, but he had to ask the most obvious question anyway. "And if I don't?"

"Then no one will see or hear from you again. You will die here for nothing and become part of the lie. Like all false men who fall as offerings to God. Hopefully, you are smarter than that."

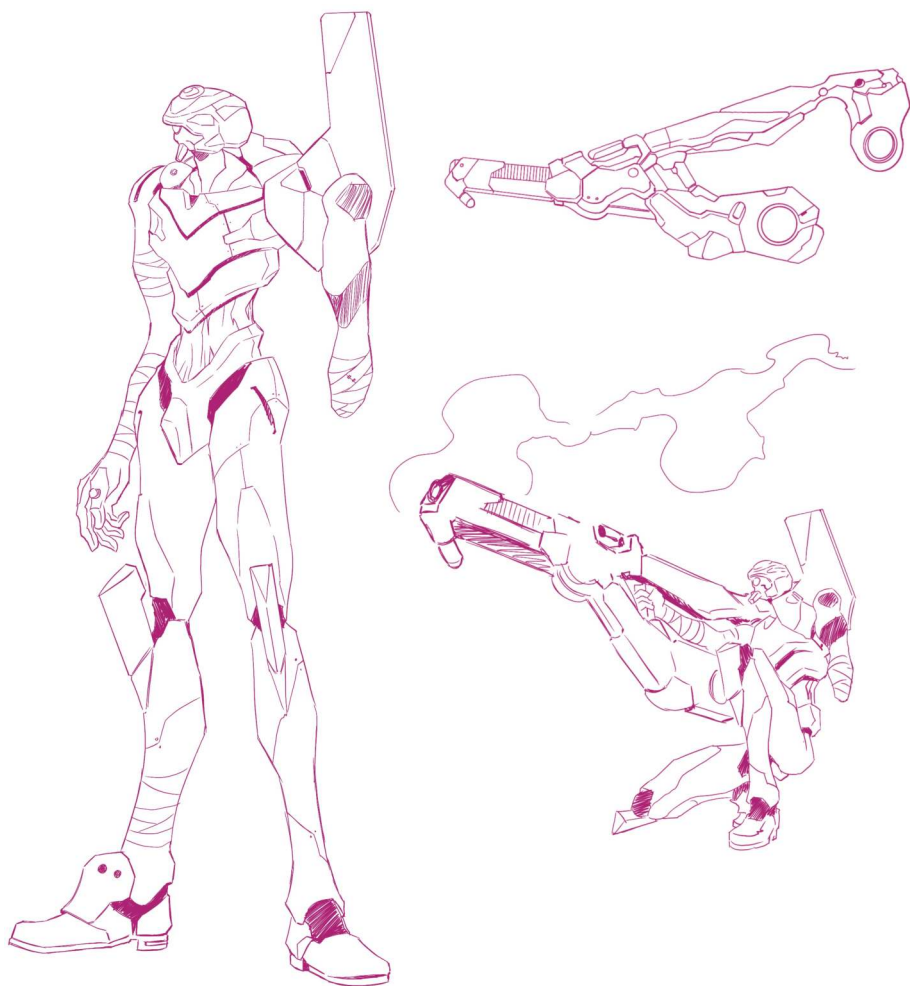
Junichi Nakajima was not sure that he was. A smart man would not have gotten himself into this. A smart man would have listened to his father and done as he was told. It was too late for that now.

It had been too late for many years.

To be continued...



EXTRAS_001
CONCEPT ART

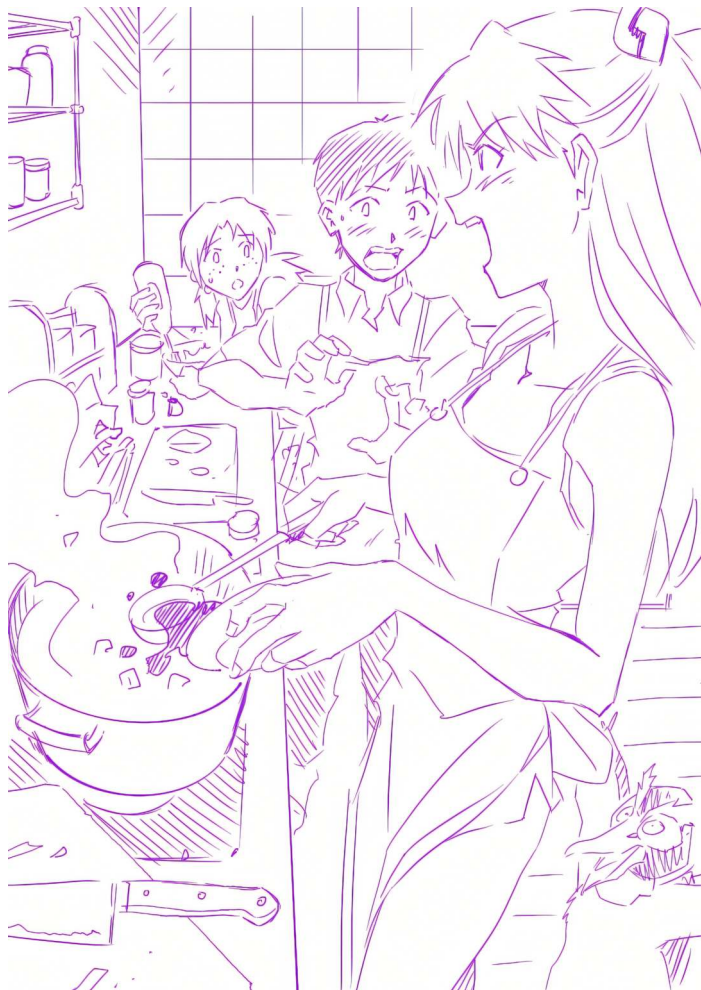




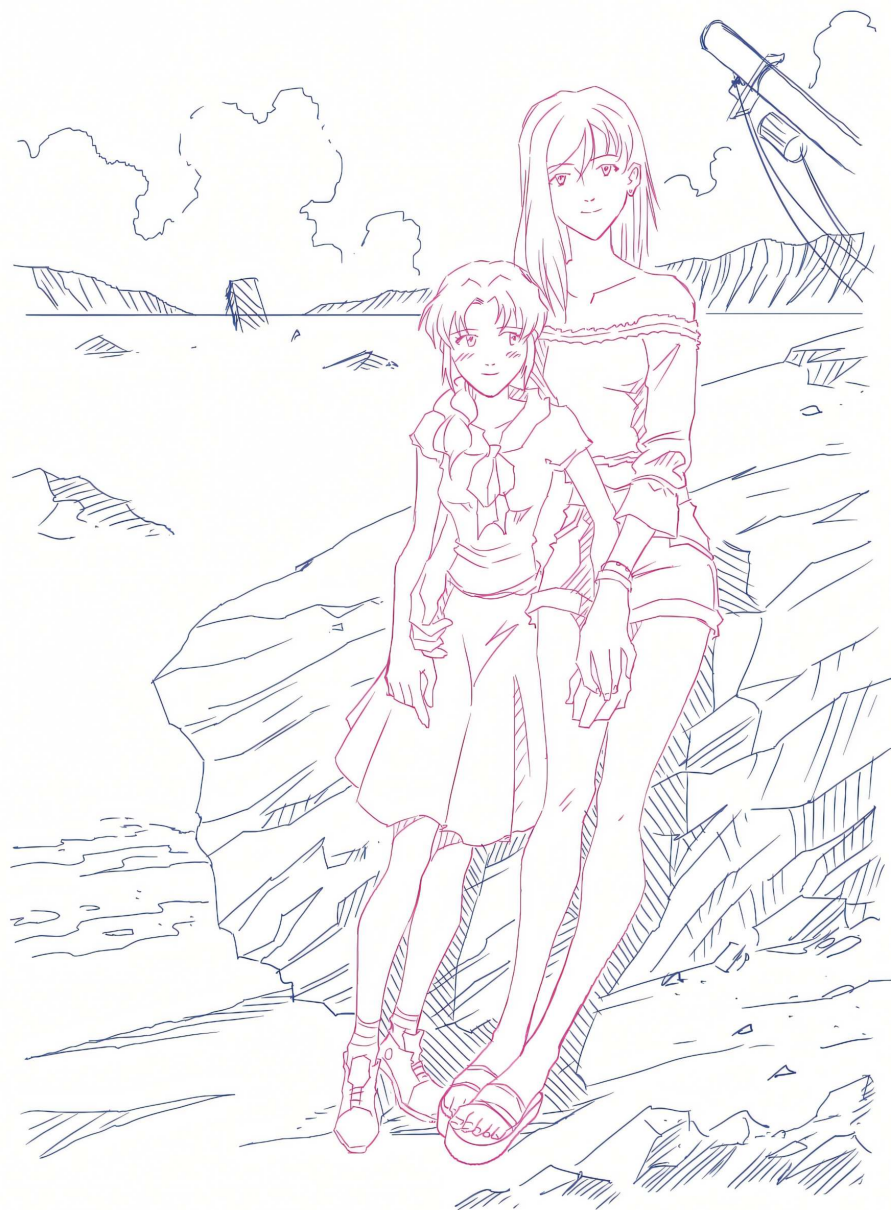
EVANGELION: GENOCIDE / TEST #4
KEIKO NAGARA

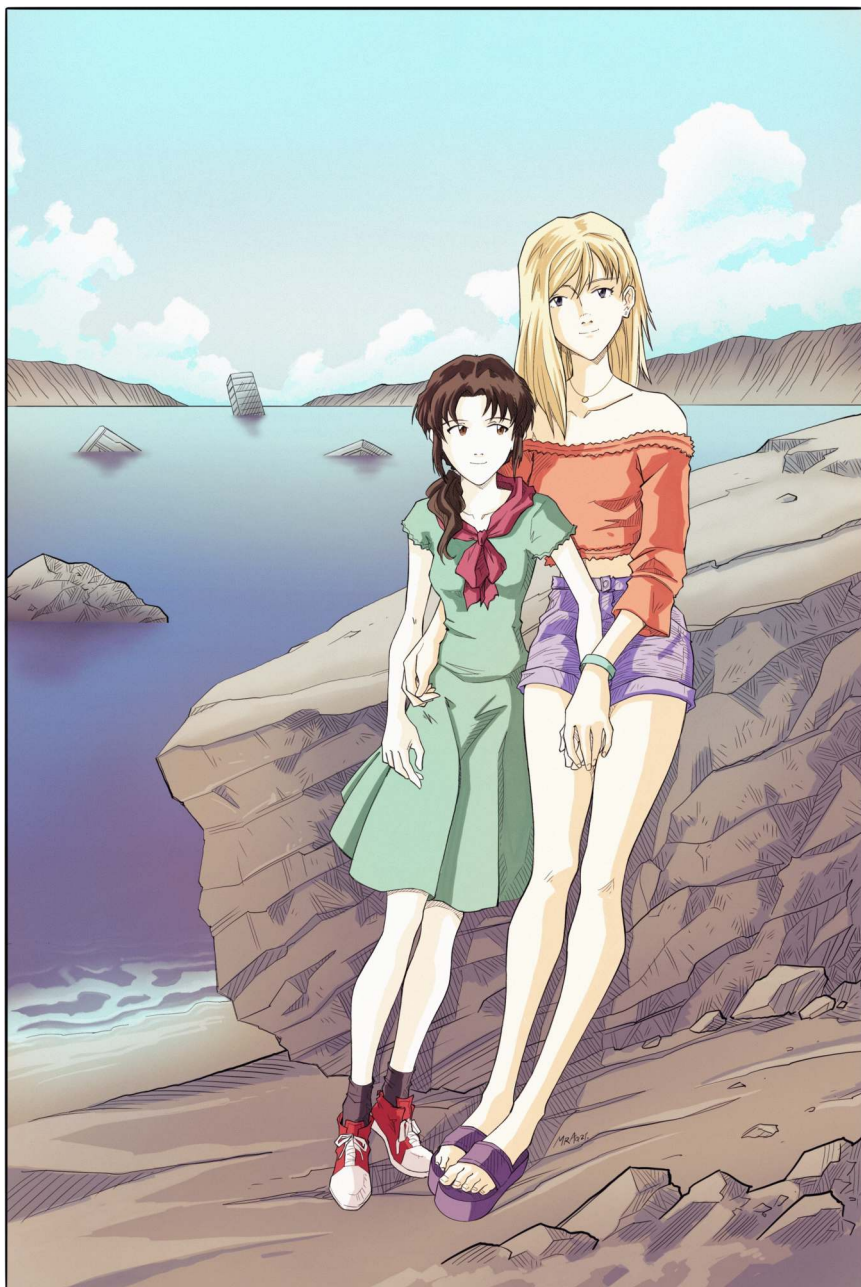
EXTRAS_002

ADDITIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS



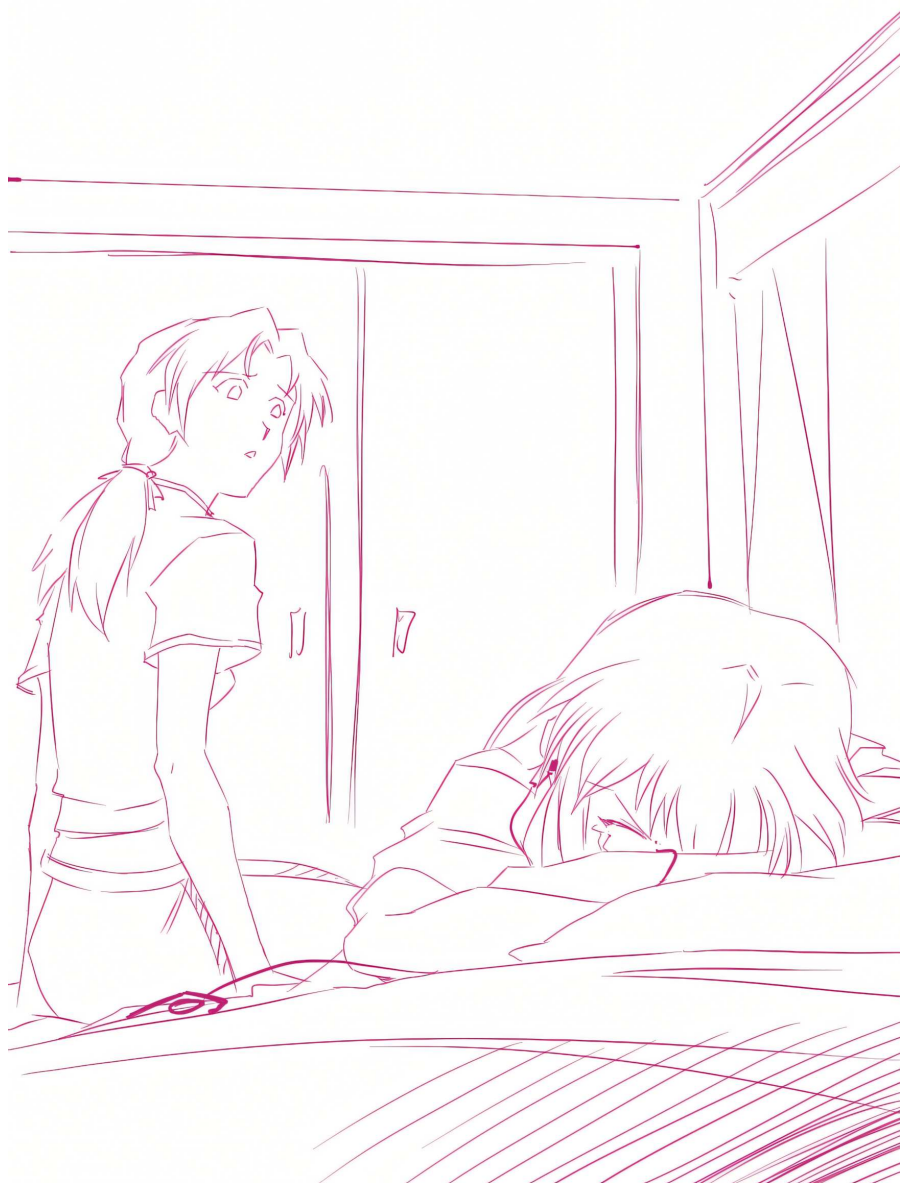


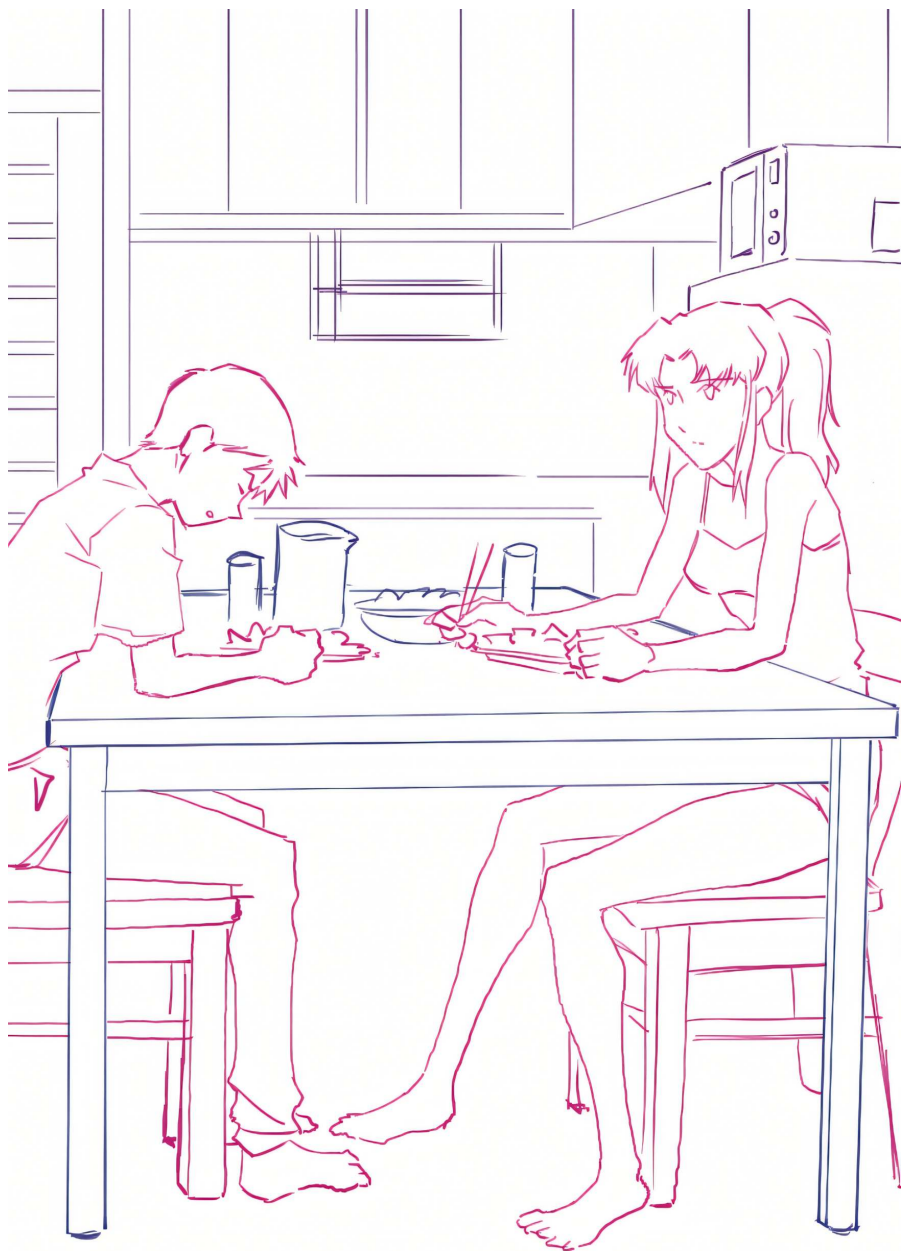


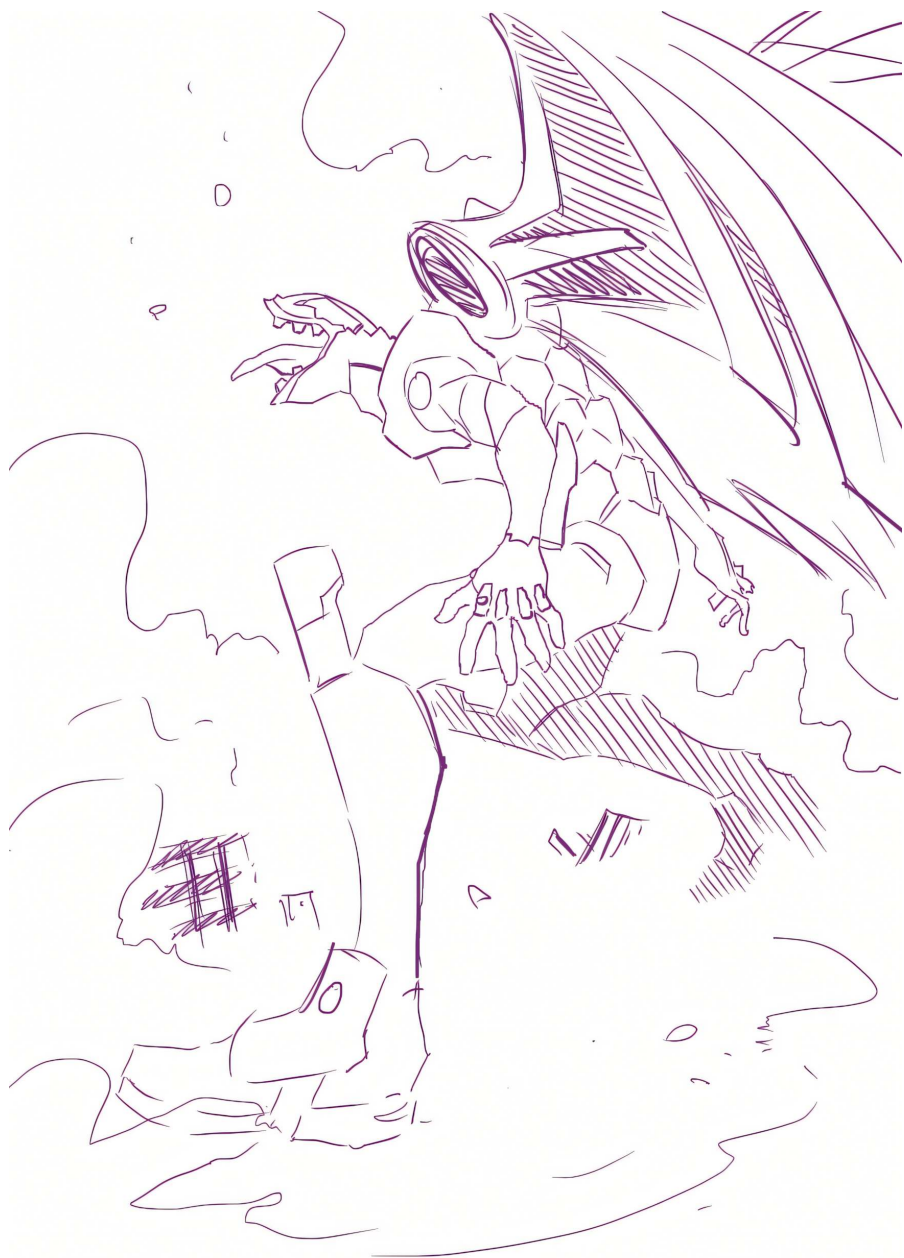


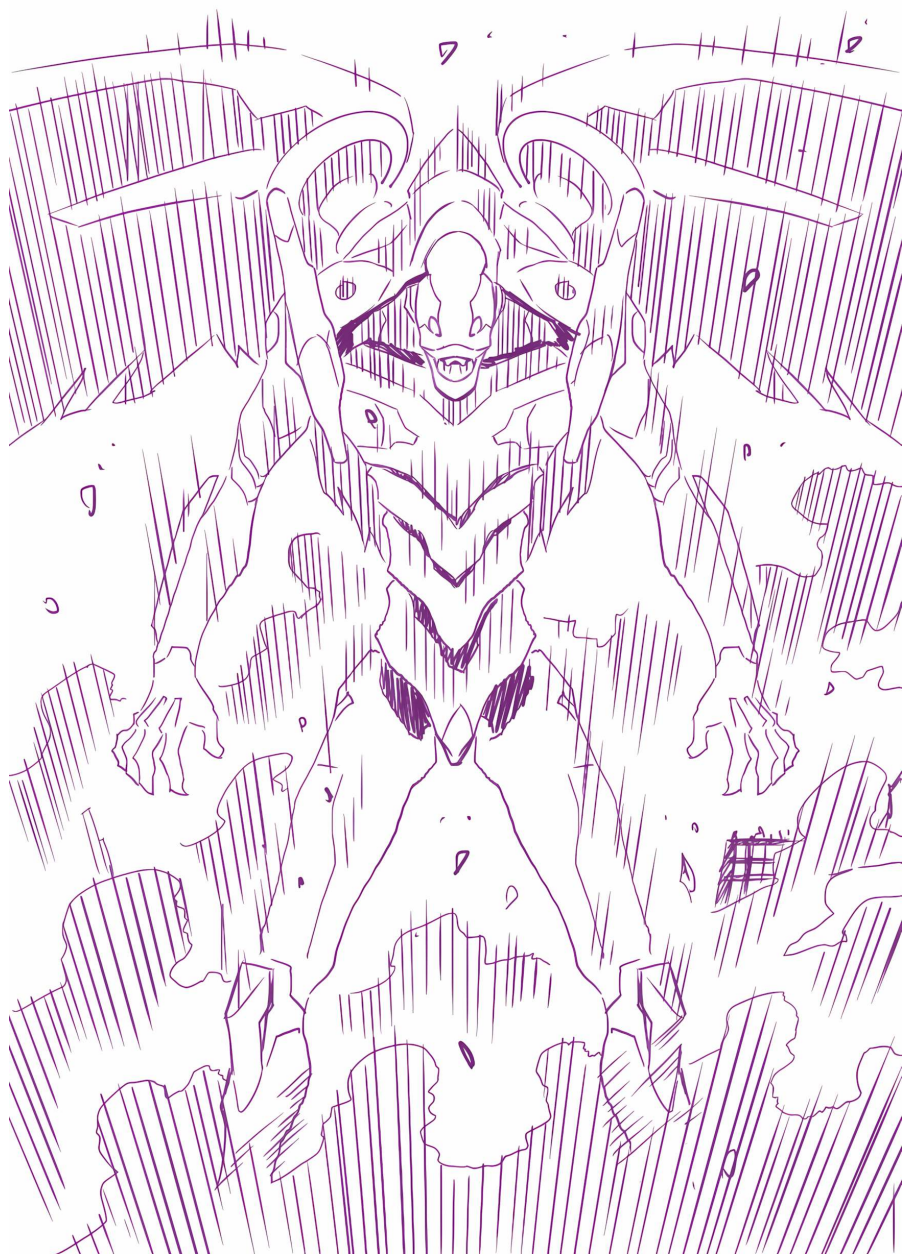
EXTRAS_003

UNUSED & WIP ILLUSTRATIONS





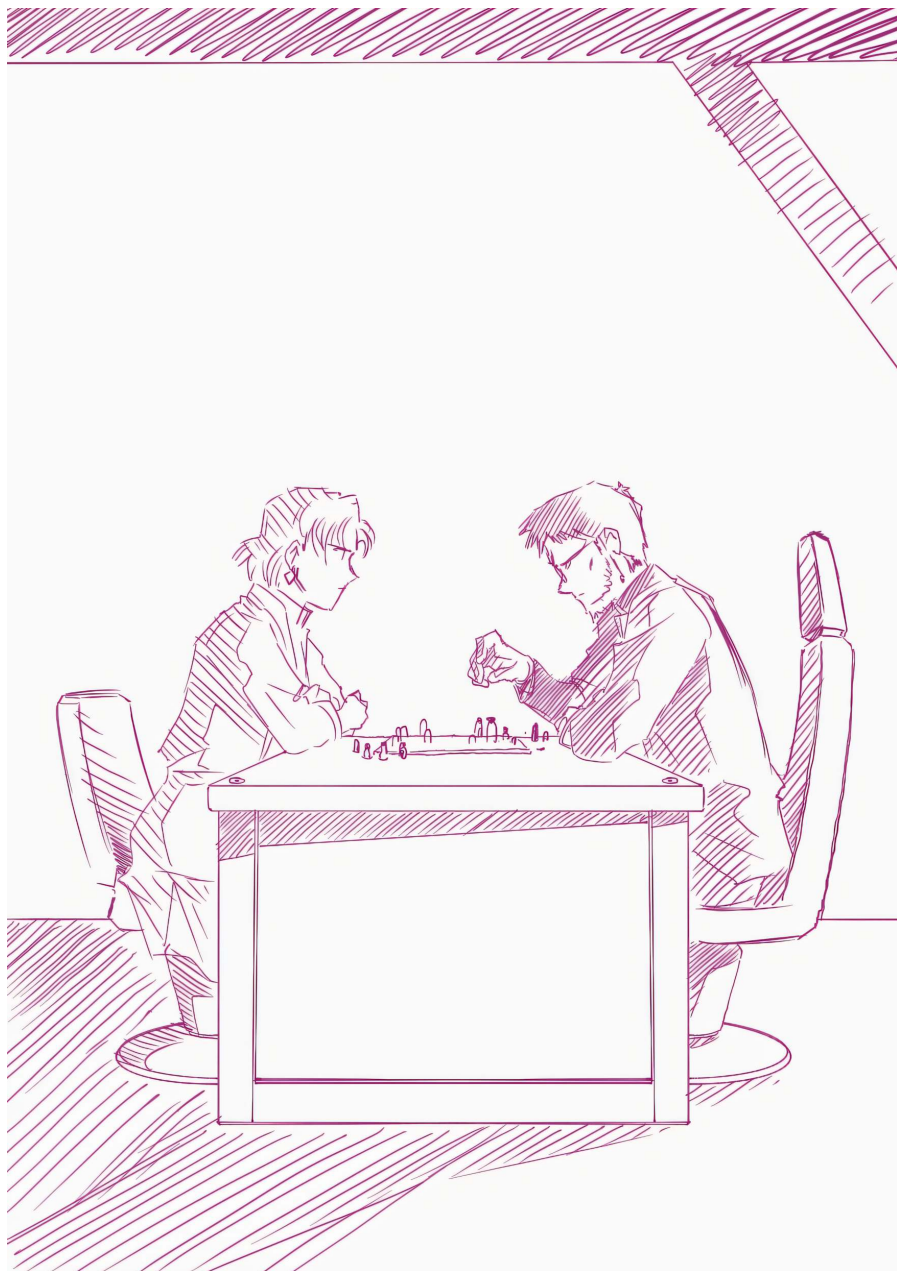








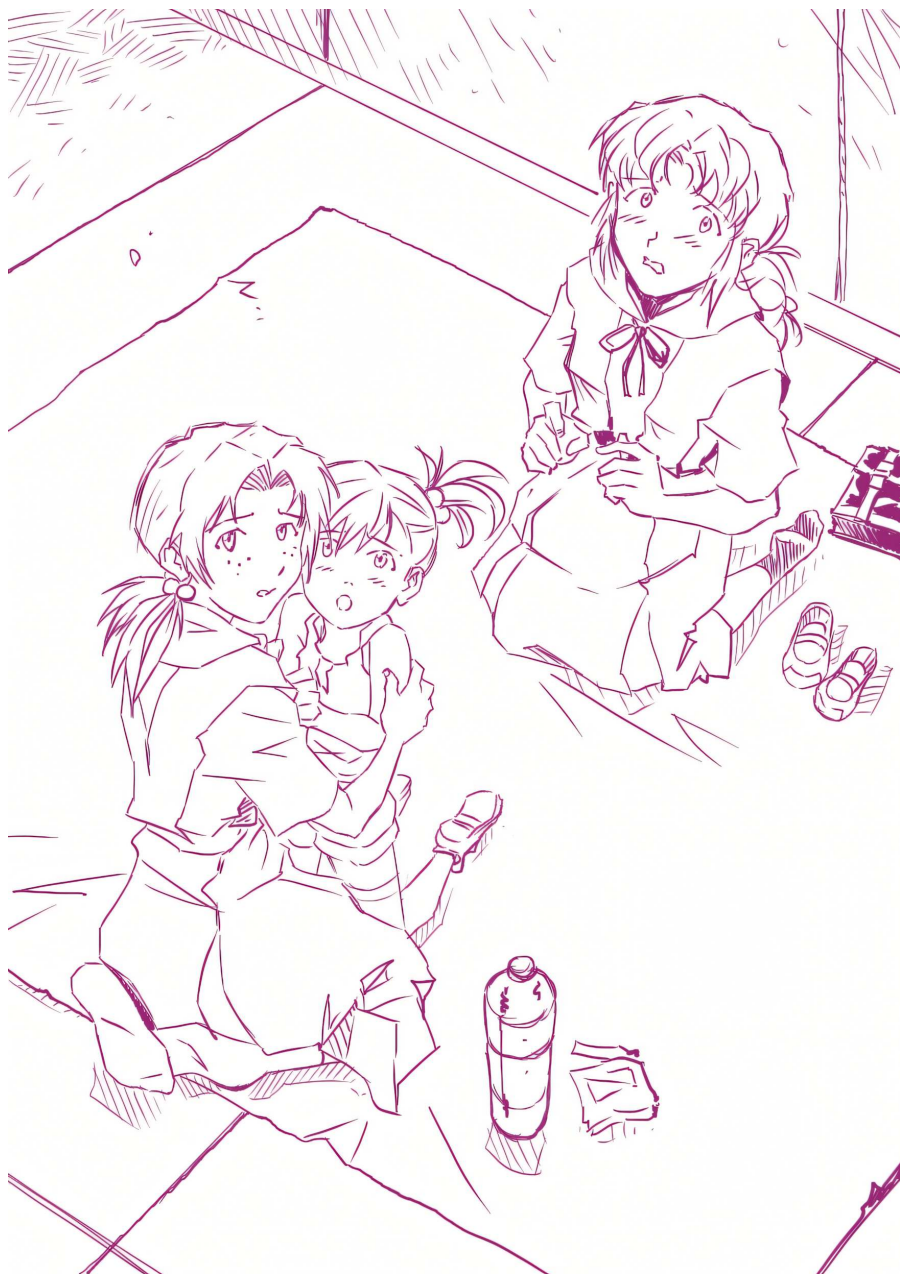


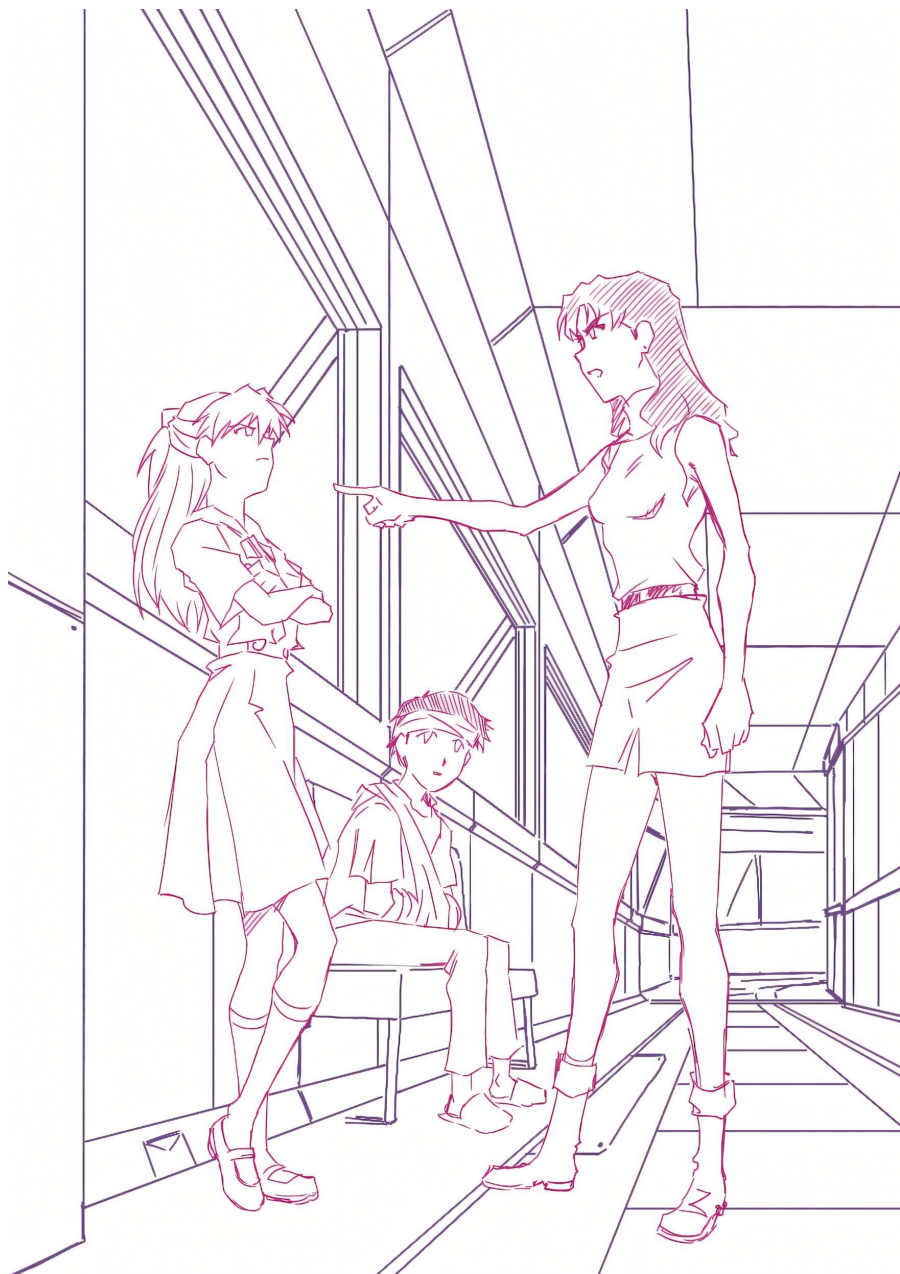


















Rommel

NEON GENESIS
EVANGELION



NEON GENESIS EVANGELION: GENOCIDE

Three months after the death of Kaworu, NERV and its people struggle to rebuild. The Children face new challenges, but for two of them may just be each other. Amidst the pain and despair, outside events quickly spiral out of control...

With Neon Genesis Evangelion: Genocide, Rommel manages to build upon the 1995 series and subsequent movies, delivering a faithful alternative storyline that perfectly captures the spirit and feeling of the original show.

Following the events of episode 24, Genocide's plot unfolds in a series of heartbreaks and touching moments, punctuated by daunting action scenes. New and unforeseen events allow for the reader to witness how our beloved cast of characters—and new ones—reacts and develops.

Will the damaged children be able to overcome their trauma, accept reality, and maybe even themselves?

2

04 - Expectations

05 - Advent

06 - Samael



Story

Artworks

Design

Rommel

MRA-Artworks

Dako Chisay

Dr_Mint

