

Rommel

NEON GENESIS
EVANGELION: GENOCIDE

PUBLISHING
Studio 3



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*“We are made wise not by the recollection of our past,
but by the responsibility for our future.”*

—George Bernard Shaw

Genocide 0:13 / Onus

He'd just turned on the sink to pour himself a glass of water when the kitchen light flashed into life and made him wince.

“Ah. Sorry,” Misato's voice said.

“N-no, it's okay,” Shinji replied, rubbing the sting out of his eyes as Misato emerged from the entrance hallway. It was late, but his guardian's schedule had never been regular enough for him to be surprised by her midnight arrivals. And with both Unit-01 and Unit-02 undergoing repairs and the damage done to Central Dogma itself, her workload must have been even heavier than usual.

Well, probably. He didn't really know. The medical staff who'd spent the last week looking after them had withheld almost all outside information and Misato was always more interested in their condition than anything else during her brief visits. Shinji understood and tried not to mind. Asuka, on the other hand, was a different story.

Fear of contamination and the possibility of violent behavior meant she'd spent the first twenty-four hours under restraint. Just one of the many things which conspired to annoy her, or so Asuka claimed.

No allowance was made for clothing either, not even underwear, and despite the shielding screens around the bed, he had still caught quite a few peeks of her laying there naked as the doctors did their examinations, poking, prodding and asking her questions.

Asuka did mostly okay, at the start, but her temper quickly turned to surly anger as she demanded they let her go and give her some clothes. Strangely, Shinji took that as a good sign. The doctors were not amused.

Once it became obvious she wasn't contaminated—and no more violent than usual—Asuka was taken off most of the machines attached to her, with the exception of the IV, and spared the need for further restraints. A thin gown was also provided. From that point on her mood improved markedly, and it soon became impossible to keep her in her own bed.

Dealing with a suddenly upbeat Asuka in such close proximity proved exhausting, but also surprisingly enjoyable. Finally, four days in, they were informed that Misato had negotiated an early release provided they stick to certain conditions in accordance with the doctors' wishes, especially Asuka.

Shinji raised the glass to his lips and drank. As he tilted his head back, a twinge of pain quickly reminded him of his injury. Misato failed to notice. She removed her shoes and draped her red jacket across the back of the nearest chair before walking over to the refrigerator.

"How come you're up so late?" she asked, glancing at him as started digging around for leftovers.

Shinji shrugged and gestured with his glass. "I wanted some water."

“Well I’m glad I caught you.” Retrieving a large plastic container, Misato checked its content, nodded and tossed it into the microwave. Then she turned and leaned back on the wooden counter, facing him fully. “I haven’t seen you since you left the hospital. I thought maybe we could get a chance to talk, you know, in private.”

“About what?” Shinji said, taking a drink.

Misato paused, waiting and perhaps deciding if she should change her mind. “About you,” she said after a moment, “and Asuka.”

Shinji held back a sigh. He had known this particular subject was bound to come up ever since openly admitting his feelings in the middle of the battle. Misato meant well, he didn’t doubt that, but it wasn’t a discussion he looked forward to having. His relationship with Asuka was complicated enough without their guardian’s involvement.

“Do we have to?”

“Yes.” Misato nodded adamantly. “We have to. Because there are some things you should know. Important things.”

Not knowing what to say, Shinji looked down towards his feet, eager to avoid her gaze. Misato waited another moment, and he hoped she would give it up. But she was merely mustering her courage.

“Shinji, love isn’t what you think it is,” Misato finally said. “It’s not all about running around giggling and making dirty jokes to each other. It’s not about holding hands. It’s not about kissing or making out. You can’t just say you are in love. Sometimes what you think love feels like isn’t really love at all.”

“Misato, I really don’t want to—”

“Too bad.” His guardian took a deep, steadying breath and carried on. “Shinji, you need to understand that love can be a contradiction. As pure as it might seem, people can still fall in love for the wrong reasons. We think we want to, that we can find happiness in someone else’s arms, but what we are really after is not love.”

Far from reassuring him, the caring and concern Shinji heard in Misato’s words only made him feel more uncomfortable. But she clearly believed what she was saying. So, even though he couldn’t look at her, he listened.

“Sometimes all we want is to fill in a void,” Misato said. “And we use other people to do that. We cling to them because they remind us of things we lost—of people we lost or feelings we used to have but have forgotten. It’s not your fault. Everyone does it, whether consciously or not. It’s hard for grown-ups to realize it, but for someone your age the hardest part is accepting it.”

“That’s not how I feel about Asuka.” Shinji shook his head. “Maybe I did at first, when I didn’t know what I was feeling, but not anymore.”

He glanced towards the kitchen doorway and imagined himself walking back to bed through the darkness. Even after the nightmares had stopped, Asuka had still decided she would continue sleeping with him, and he suddenly wanted to return to her more than anything. She’d waited long enough already.

“Shinji.” Misato moved closer and placed her hand on his shoulder. “I didn’t mean you. I meant Asuka.”

Shinji frowned at her. “I . . . don’t understand.”

Misato squeezed his shoulder gently, her face so awash in loving concern that Shinji had to turn his head away again. "Asuka is a very complicated girl, and love is a very complicated thing. Put them together and you get an extremely complicated relationship. You are probably very clear on what you want from that relationship, but you can never know for sure what she wants."

Shinji shook his head but could not find any words to argue with. He'd never been good at expressing his feelings, and much less when they related to someone else. Someone who'd be very annoyed if she ever found him discussing their relationship behind her back.

"Even if she told you, you would never know if it was the truth. You'll do anything to give her what you think she wants: your heart, your mind, your body—" Misato gave him a dirty look that made his blush deepen "—your very being in any conceivable way. But you can never know if that is what she wants. What she really wants. And that can lead to doubt and separation."

Taking a breath, Shinji felt his shoulders sag. He still refused to look at her. "Why are you telling me this?" he asked, his voice low and sullen. "Don't you want me to be happy?"

Misato stepped closer, erasing the gap between them, and bent over slightly. Her hands moved upwards, brushing his neck and gently cupping his face, lifting both his head and his gaze.

Shinji looked at her in sudden surprise, stuck between the urge to pull away from her touch and paralyzed at the soothing warmth from her hands. Even Asuka seldom touched him in such an intimate, adult way. And Misato was ... she was ...

His guardian leaned even closer. For a moment, Shinji was afraid she would kiss him. He squeezed his eyes shut, but then he felt her forehead press softly against his.

“I want you so much to be happy,” Misato whispered.
“You have no idea how much I want you to be happy.”

Shinji’s discomfort turned to puzzlement. “Then why—”

“I’m telling you because I don’t want you to be disappointed,” Misato said, her voice softening. “Because I don’t want you to wake up one day with Asuka by your side and realize that what you thought was happiness is something else. Something sadder. I don’t want you to realize that your heart is empty, you just didn’t know it. I don’t want you to regret it.”

“Misato . . .”

The soft patter of bare feet on the carpet prevented him from going any further. Shinji opened his eyes and shifted his glance just as Asuka wandered sleepily into the kitchen, clad in her long shirt and not much else.

Oh no, Shinji thought, certain that Asuka would get the wrong idea seeing them like this. But her expression remained drowsy as her eyes peered at him from behind tousled locks of hair, then at Misato, then back at him.

“This is a weird dream,” Asuka murmured.
“Are we supposed to take our clothes off now?”

Misato let Shinji go and straightened up. “Hi, Asuka,” she said, a little too lightheartedly. “How are you feeling?”

“Sleepy.” Asuka yawned loudly, stretching her arms. She had gotten through the fight nearly unscathed, but her condition before that had become a cause for great concern. The chronic insomnia, emotional exhaustion, and poor eating habits, when she ate at all, had taken their toll. Her doctors had been horrified and refused to release her unless she committed to take better care of herself and agreed to a new, more healthy diet.

Of course, Shinji was responsible for the latter. The doctor gave him a list of things Asuka could eat and an even longer list of things she could not. Sweets and junk food were now officially banned in the Katsuragi household.

“Well, that’s an improvement right there,” Misato said, taking Shinji out of his reverie. “I’m glad you’re sleeping better.”

Asuka nodded vaguely, then turned her attention to Shinji. “You coming back to bed or what, Third Child?”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there. Just getting some water.”
He hurriedly chugged the glass.

Asuka seemed appeased, for now, but as she was about to head back through the darkened apartment Misato called out to her. “Hey, hold on a second.”

Asuka stopped mid-step. “What?”

“Before I forget, Maya wanted me to tell you that you have a synch test scheduled for Sunday,” Misato said. “Unit-02 is still undergoing repairs after, well, I’m sure you remember. So we’ll have to work on synch testing for now.”

“Sunday, got it.” Again, Asuka turned to leave, and again Misato stopped her.

“There’s one more thing,” the older woman said, her voice graver. “Maya is in charge of this test. I’ll be there, too. I don’t expect it to be a problem. But if Ritsuko comes up to you I don’t want you talking to her. In fact, I don’t want you anywhere near her on your own.”

“Huh?” Asuka blinked. “Why?”

“She . . .” Misato trailed off, and it seemed to take her another few seconds to find the right words. “She doesn’t have your best interest at heart. Do it for me, as a favor.”

“You already owe me a lot of favors,” Asuka said, looking her over. Shinji could see the usual cunning spark lighting up behind the bright blue irises, determining intentions and measuring responses.

“One day I’ll pay them all back,” Misato said with a smile. “I promise. Until then just add one more to the list.”

Asuka shrugged her shoulders. “Fine, whatever. It’s not like I’m friends with her.” Her thin eyebrows flattened in deadpan. “Anything else?”

Misato waved her off. “No, you’re good. ‘Night.”

Asuka mumbled something that sounded vaguely like “good night.” She turned and vanished into the dark space of the living room, the sound of her shuffling footsteps fading away into silence.

Shinji set the empty glass on the table and attempted to follow her before Misato could pick up where Asuka’s entrance had left her. He almost made it out of the kitchen. Almost.

“Shinji, about before,” his guardian said, a little more hesitantly. “I didn’t tell you any of that to upset you. That is the last thing I want to do. You know that, right?”

There were few things Shinji Ikari knew for certain, and that was one of them.

“Yeah.”

“I realize young people are not usually inclined to listen to advice, but everything I’ve told you I’ve learned from experience and I hope you listen because—” Misato seemed to choke on that word “—because if you know all this and you still love her, and you know that you love her, then despite whatever doubts you have, whatever fears, whatever insecurities, you should hold on to her with all the strength you have. Hold on to her, because if you let go you will regret it all your life. I promise that you will. And those are the kind of mistakes that there might not be enough time to correct.”

Shinji swiveled his head around to look at her, their eyes locking together. “There is no doubt, Misato,” he said firmly. “I better go now. You know Asuka doesn’t like it when someone makes her wait.”

“I know. Good night, Shinji.” Misato forced a smile. “Sleep tight.”

His own smile came much more easily. “Thank you.”

It didn’t strike him until he was laying again in his bed, his back turned to Asuka’s slender form under the same set of sheets, that there really was no doubt whatsoever about the way he felt for her. She might feel differently. She might still have doubts. And if she did, he would figure it out and try to understand. But he would not let go.





“Why are you outside?” Rei Ayanami said softly, the only way she ever spoke.

Junichi Nakajima had become used to it over the last couple of days so neither her voice nor her presence startled him, but he still wished she would make more noise. Kids her age were supposed to be loud, self-centered and obnoxious. Rei Ayanami was none of those things.

He had been sitting on the floor just outside Keiko Nagara’s hospital room for the better part of an hour now, and when he lifted his head to look at the blue-haired girl his neck felt stiff. Two shimmering rubies looked back.

“It’s complicated,” he said.

“It seems simple to me, unless I misunderstand,” Rei replied. “You are welcomed. Therefore, if you wish to go inside, why do you wait here?”

Nakajima shrugged her off. He was not in the mood to answer questions. He was not in the mood for anything. Ever since Major Katsuragi had slapped him and told him he was disgusting, he’d found it hard to rid himself of the feeling of dejection. He had truly meant to do the right thing by Keiko and Miko, but now he wasn’t sure what that even was. “Why do you care?”

“Because you look sad.”

That surprised him. He looked at her more carefully. Her pleasant features seemed completely unemotional; her body language was straight and controlled. She wasn’t trying to intrude, that much was apparent. She was just there.

“Well, I’m not,” Nakajima said. It wasn’t a lie, simply because he didn’t know what sadness felt like anymore. “I’m trying to make a decision. Grown up stuff. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Understanding is not dependent on age,” Rei said.
“A child does not have to understand to love their parents.”

Nakajima snickered. “Most of us outgrow childish love.”

“And replace it with anger, and bitterness,” Rei said.
“Yes, I have seen that.”

“It’s called growing up, Miss Ayanami.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I don’t know.” Nakajima shook his head. Of course he knew—he wasn’t stupid. He was here because he cared about the girls in that room, and because he loved one of them. But having tried, and failed, to do the only thing he could think of to protect them, that knowledge didn’t help him at all.
If anything, it made the sense of helplessness worse.

“You do,” Rei said, calling his lie without a hint of accusation.
“But you do not understand.”

“You are assuming there’s a difference,” he told her.

“There is.” Rei’s face remained stoic.
The light made her skin appear an incredibly pale white.

Nakajima scowled. “You know, if you want to help, maybe you should try being less deliberately vague. Even for a—” a child, he wanted to say but couldn’t,
“for a teenager, you seem strangely cryptic.”

“I do not see the problem. I know, and I try to understand.
That is enough for me. Perhaps it should be for you as well.”

Something about the calm, soft way she said those words gave him pause. Before falling in love, he would have dismissed them as the naive fantasies of a sheltered girl who was far too young to know better. Now, he wasn't really sure. Nobody had needed to tell him he was in love. He hadn't needed to understand. He had simply felt it, like he had felt he should do what he could to help Miko and Keiko no matter what it might cost any of them.

He was still trying to come up with an answer when the door to Keiko's room opened and Miko stepped out, looking attractive as she always did in his eyes. He pulled himself hurriedly to his feet, but the blonde kept her attention on Rei.

"Are you here to see Keiko again, Rei?" Miko asked the young albino girl.

"Yes."

Miko moved aside to let her pass, a faint smile lifting her features. Rei walked silently inside without another word to either her or Nakajima and the two of them exchanged a look. The door closed after the First Child.

"She's a good girl," Miko said. "She's been coming in to see Keiko just about every day. I didn't think Keiko had made any close friends like that. She always wanted to get along with Asuka, but I didn't know she and Rei were close." She drew closer to him, holding her hands together. "It's comforting, to be honest. I don't know what it is, but Rei ... I don't know. She's got this aura. It's heavenly."

"Some people would just call it weird," Nakajima said.

Miko slapped him on the arm. "Don't say that, you jerk." She looked back at the door for a moment. "It's not weird at all."

Nakajima said nothing, feeling he had not earned the right to contradict her. And, in a way, he was not really sure Rei visiting a fellow pilot was weird. He recalled what she said to him a moment ago. A child didn't need to understand to love their parents. Why couldn't it be the same with adults?

"What about you, Mister Secret Agent?" Miko said, returning her glance to him, the smile he liked so much still there. "They'll be in there for a while. Wanna have some breakfast?"

He wasn't sure she would be smiling after he said what he'd come to say. But he'd rather come clean. Miko would need to know eventually, and the sooner he did, the sooner he might gain her cooperation.

Or so he hoped.

"I need to tell you something," Nakajima said. He reached out and took her hand tightly in his. "Breakfast would be nice, though. And empty stomachs make for bad decisions. Just ... not in the cafeteria."

* * *

Hyuga took his eyes away from the screen showing Asuka's video feed from inside the test plug and cast a relieved glance up at Misato.

"At least she looks happy," he said.

"She does, doesn't she?" Misato agreed, moving back. She had been leaning so far over his shoulder she was practically in his lap. The young redhead on the screen had her eyes closed, her relaxed face holding only a slight smile across her lips.

“If you had told me last week I’d be seeing her smile I would have sent you in for a medical check-up.”

“I guess things really have changed for her,” Maya said, standing near the observation window, her gaze fixed on the test plug beyond. Misato looked at her closely. There had been something strange about the younger woman lately, a sense of distance that hadn’t been there before. “She’s had such a tough time.”

Because of Ritsuko, Misato reminded herself acidly. Her so-called friend and her were no longer on speaking terms, which was probably for the best at this point.

So far, she had refrained from exposing the secret of what Ritsuko had done, even to Asuka herself, and she wasn’t sure if she should. She knew some in the staff might agree that Ritsuko’s actions were justified given the threat they’d faced, but to find out that her trust had been betrayed like that would anger Asuka in the extreme. And it would certainly make her stop smiling.

“What’s her Synch Rate?” Maya asked from the front.

Hyuga quickly scanned another screen. “94.2 percent,” he said. “Give or take five-tenths for error correction. Harmonics, and vitals are stable. No sign of contamination or the anomaly. Surprising when you consider that we haven’t reloaded Unit-02’s operating system. Um, EEG shows stimuli to her limbic system.”

“She’s enjoying herself,” Misato concluded. That had been the rule rather than exception over the last week, but it was still surprising. She thought Asuka would be peeved, if not outright annoyed, at being left in the hospital again. However, the fact that she had been locked up with Shinji seemed to have worked wonders on her.

Of course, their closeness represented another issue entirely. Shinji had made his feelings for Asuka clear, and he obviously believed that went both ways. For her part, Asuka continued to pick on him like usual, and it worried Misato that Shinji might be wrong. And even if he wasn't, that was no guarantee. It had pained her to have to bring these things up with him, but he had to know.

Still, there was no denying a change had taken place in the redhead. The picture from Unit-02's entry-plug showed that as unmistakably as possible. Asuka was good at faking and hiding how she really felt, a talent honed by pride and arrogance, but not this good.

"Let me talk to her," Misato ordered.

Hyuga pressed a button in his console and signaled for her to speak.

"Asuka," Misato said, raising her voice slightly, "How are you doing?"

The young face on the monitor remained relaxed. "Fine," Asuka said. "I told you already, it feels right again. How's it going over there?"

"Pretty good," Misato replied. Even Asuka's voice seemed to have changed in the last week. Before it had a heavy, angry quality to it. Now it was sharp, light, and full of energy.

Just like Asuka herself was full of energy. No more dropping her head or dragging her feet or slouching shoulders. Their late-night meeting in the kitchen notwithstanding, the Second Child prowled around with a kind of confidence she had been badly missing.

She seemed so much more like the Asuka Misato had first met in Germany, an extremely precocious 10 year-old accustomed to getting whatever she wanted—and whining incessantly when she didn't.

Misato felt a warm sensation spreading in her chest. Like she did with Shinji, she wanted to think of Asuka as a happy child even if the traumas of her childhood had all but ruined her innocence. She was smiling again now, Misato would take that as a good sign. Barely midway through her teens, there was still hope for her yet.

She turned her head back to Maya.
“Anything else you need, Maya?”

Maya checked the list on her clipboard.
“No, I think we’ve got everything.” She flipped through some pages.
“Her results are better than expected, actually.”

Misato tilted her head to Asuka’s image.
“Hear that, Asuka? We’re done up here. Are you ready to go?”

On the screen, Asuka’s eyes finally opened. “Awww, do I have to?”
“Yes.” Misato looked curiously at Hyuga. There had been something in Asuka’s smarmy disappointed-but-not-really tone which brought a grin to his face. “There’s a line in your contract that says you can only have so much fun,” she added.
“I’d say you crossed that line maybe, oh, ten minutes ago.”

Asuka wrinkled her nose and made a face. “Spoilsport.”

Misato gave Maya a nod and the shutdown sequence began. While that was being done, Misato walked to the observation window. LCL drained from the cage like water from a bathtub and the test plug opened, revealing the complicated control seat and console within.

Asuka, slender and clad in vivid red amongst the otherwise drab interior, sat forward, wringing her soaked hair in her gloved hands. Then she stood and jumped out. She was met by a technician from Unit-02's crew who wasted no time handing her a towel.

After watching Asuka practically skip towards the chamber exit, Misato glanced down and checked her watch.

"Hyuga, have you seen Nakajima?"

Suddenly, Hyuga seemed annoyed. "Sorry, but no. That guy does whatever he wants, and it's not like we have to keep tabs on him."

"I'll just call his cell phone." Misato decided not to acknowledge his outburst. She knew from the way Hyuga acted around her sometimes that he wanted there to be more between them than just a working relationship, and she wished she could return his feelings. He was a nice guy who was always looking to help, but he wasn't Misato's type.

Nakajima wasn't her type either.

Maybe she should have taken the time to explain that to Hyuga.

Misato patted the operator on the shoulder and walked out, reaching into her pocket for her cell phone. She had just started to dial when she ran into Asuka coming towards the locker rooms, suit glistening with LCL and escorted by a tall, dark-haired technician—a member of Delta Team, Unit-02's tech crew.

Over the last few days, the Geo-Front had split down the middle between those who didn't think Asuka should be allowed near an Eva Unit ever again, and those who did. Nobody really believed anyone meant her any harm, but Delta Team, having always worked with her and Unit-02, had taken it upon themselves to act as bodyguards. Just in case emotions ran too hot.

Misato hoped the whole thing would blow over soon. But seeing people support her ward made her grateful. She had already requested that every member of Delta Team who volunteered to chaperone Asuka receive a bonus.

Asuka didn't seem to mind. She acted like she was getting spoiled, and she loved being spoiled. It was her natural state, she had told Misato.

"It was good, wasn't it?" Asuka pipped up animatedly as she approached, bouncing up and down on the balls of her plug-suited feet. The smell of LCL clung to her heavily, wafting up like a cloud. "I mean, of course, that's what you'd expect from me."

Misato put down her cell phone and looked warmly at her ward. "That's what Maya said. It could be a new record."

Asuka grinned. "You know, I haven't been anywhere near my record in almost a year."

"Yeah, I know," Misato said. Remembering Asuka didn't like to be touched, she resisted the urge to put her hand on her shoulder. Hugging her was entirely out of the question. "Are you going home now?"

"Ya-ha!" Asuka bobbed her head.

"I guess I'll see you later, then," Misato said. "I've got some things to take care of at the moment. Take care."

"Yeah, yeah, sure." Asuka gave her a wave and bounced off.

Misato watched her go, followed closely by her escort. Only fourteen years old and she had already survived and endured so much. She was just a child, so young and yet at times she had seemed dead on the inside—just like Shinji. Then she glanced at her cellphone.

She knew what she had to do.



Junichi Nakajima was already waiting for her on the bridge between Central Dogma and the main road to the surface. His black uniform made him seem ominous and threatening, but Misato had learned he was as harmless as a man in love could be.

Misato parked her car on the near side and walked across the roadway, still not entirely sure what she would say. If he was the sort to hold a grudge she wasn't going to be getting much done. Then again, if that was the case, he wouldn't have agreed to come in the first place. He was here because he wanted something, just like she did.

"Major Katsuragi," Nakajima said pleasantly, taking his elbows off the safety rail and straightening. "You sounded urgent."

"Thank you for meeting me," Misato said.
"I was rather unfair to you before. I have to apologize for that."

"Don't worry about it," Nakajima said, shaking his head.
"What can I do for you?"

"I think I made a mistake," Misato started, turning her head so she could look him in the eyes.
"I think I should have at least listened to you."

He was shaking his head again before she'd even finished.
"No. I had no right to ask. You don't owe me anything. It was just ... that's all I know. Asking favors of people for my own ends. I guess I inherited that from my father."

Misato could relate to that. The only way she knew of getting answers out of people was to point a gun at them. "This deal you talked about ... you mind giving me the details?"

That seemed to surprise him. His brow tightened. "Really?"

“Hold on.” Misato held up her hand.
“I’m not saying I’m committing myself to anything.
I don’t have enough information to do that.
That’s why I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“Okay.”

“I think you might have the right idea,” Misato said. “But you went about it the wrong way, and I just wasn’t ready to listen. After last week—did you hear?”

Nakajima nodded, his eyes not leaving hers. “The whole place was shaking. And ... I’ve heard some rumors but nothing more.”

There’s always rumors, Misato thought. And there’s always secrets.

But she wasn’t really interested in that. All she needed to know was that once again she’d found herself on the wrong side of the road, following blindly because it was easier than raising uncomfortable questions and placing misguided duty ahead of those she cared for.

Ritsuko had made it all too clear when she had explained about the Emerald Tablet that Asuka’s life had no intrinsic value on its own. She was a lab rat, a disposable experiment that could be discarded after it ran out of usefulness. At no point had she seemed to consider her health, or how something like this would affect her. How it would damage her, perhaps permanently.

Another, more sickening thought occurred to her: what if Asuka’s new-found happiness was, in fact, the result of this damage? No, her neural scans would pick that up. And Asuka would say something if she didn’t feel right.

Sure, Misato chided herself, because Asuka always shares her feelings.

Putting the reasons for Asuka's happiness aside, the only good thing to come out of this situation was that learning the truth had forced Misato to make a decision.

"I owe these children a future," Misato said after a moment. "I'm not proud of a lot of things. If I could go back and change what I've done, I would. But I can't. And now it's gone too far. Farther than I ever should have allowed it to go."

"I'm not sure how useful I can be," Nakajima said. "The deal I was hoping for was Miko and Keiko in exchange for an interview with you."

Misato had already figured as much.

"Call your people. I want to talk to them. You said you wanted to take the girls with you, to resign and go away. Tell them I want the same. I want to take the children to a place where they can just be children and be happy. It's my onus."

She looked away as she said this, focusing instead on the huge pyramid in the distance. The first time she saw it she'd been nothing short of amazed that such a structure could exist so deep underground. Now it seemed like a meaningless monument, a tomb like its Egyptian counterparts, dead and empty.

"But what about piloting the Evas?" Nakajima said. "What about the Angels?"

"Lies," Misato confessed. "The 17th Angel was the last real angel. Something happened when the Chinese activated Unit-A that artificially created the others. The Emerald Tablet was part of it. Some sort of weaponized interface program for the Eva. Unit-A was using it when it became active. Ritsuko said it could recombine DNA, so I assume that's how it did it." She shook her head ruefully. "We were never able to fully identify any of the Angels after that. The waveform patterns never matched."

“Wait. The Emerald Tablet?” Nakajima’s voice sounded distressed. “I know that name. It was part of a project Gendo Ikari requested from the Ministry of the Interior. We were interested in maintaining cooperation so we didn’t object.”

“Ritsuko put that thing in Unit-02 with Asuka as well,” Misato continued, still refusing to look at him, her voice turning hard. “I swear she’s done some awful things in her life, but I will never forgive her for that. I have no doubt that’s what made Asuka attack Keiko. If it can destroy an entire city—”

“Excuse me, Major, are you saying NERV created these Angels?” Nakajima said, and he was starting to sound angry. “Half-a-million people died in Beijing.”

If he wanted to blame her he could go right ahead, but Misato was through taking responsibility for other people’s atrocities. She would point the finger right where it belonged.

“Not NERV,” she said, turning her head towards him, seeing his face as if for the first time. “Gendo Ikari did. Ritsuko Akagi did.”

“And Keiko . . .” Nakajima trailed off, then shook his head. Despair replaced the anger in his eyes. “Oh, God. All she’s been through. She . . . she’s crippled!”

In a way, both Asuka and Shinji had been crippled as well, on the inside at least. Emotionally if not physically, although that jury was still out. But such a thing would never change her regard for them.

“Is she worth any less to you?” Misato said.

“What?” Nakajima scowled at her as if she had just insulted him. “No, of course not.”

“No one who had been touched by Eva remains unhurt. Shinji once told me that every time he got in the Eva, someone ended up getting hurt. I don’t think he knew how close he was to the truth.

The Eva might be the weapon of our salvation, but it hurts people. It's what it does. That is the real tragedy of the Evangelion."

Nakajima came closer, standing in front of her.

"Can you prove any of this? About the Angels? About China?"

"I'm sure I can find a way," Misato said. "Even if I can't, you have my word that it's all true. In certain circles I think that would be enough. And I have a lot more. Information is power so I took it upon myself to dig up as much as I could. Would you like to know what really happened during Second Impact, for instance?"

He shook his head. "Major, with this kind of information you can make any deal you want, with anybody. But it would be the end of NERV. The end of everything you've worked for."

"NERV is finished as it is, Ritsuko said so. I have given too much to this organization. Frankly, I feel it's time I take something back."

"What about the children?" Nakajima said. "Have you told them?"

Misato bit her lip. Conspiracy she could deal with, but Asuka and Shinji were a much more personal issue. "Not yet," she admitted.

"Major, when I brought up the possibility of a deal, you asked me if I'd told Miko, and if I'd considered Keiko, and when I said no you called me selfish." Nakajima stepped in front of her, cutting off her view of Central Dogma. His face was set but not angry.

"Are you really thinking of the children or are you doing this because you want payback?"

"It's not payback." Misato sighed. "Every time I see Shinji's face it's like something twists inside of me. Like a ball of guilt and pain and sadness just rolling around in my stomach. And he's in love now. Despite everything he has been through, all the horrible things he's been forced to do, he's fallen in love. Asuka too. They deserve a chance. I can give them that. I have to give them that."

Even if I have to sell my soul. What more can I do?
I can't just let things continue the way they are."

She knew from the look of sympathy on his face that she didn't need to say or explain anything else. He had the same reasons.

"I'll make the call right away," Nakajima said.
"It'll probably take a few days to make arrangements."

"Thank you." Misato sensed a new determination growing within her. "Not that it will make me change my mind, but who exactly are your people anyway?"

"His name is Hidetoshi Sato. An old friend of my father.
He is Echelon's man in Kyoto."

Misato furrowed her brow. "American? British? Canadian?"

"American," Nakajima confirmed and seemed shocked at the sardonic grin that spread across her face.

"Of course."

Something had clicked in Misato's head—a tiny detail she'd once read on a dossier a long time ago. America had changed a lot since Second Impact in order to survive, like all empires before her. But one thing remained the same: America took care of those she considered her own. And she might just be able to use that in her favor.

"Alright, let me know as soon as you hear from this Sato guy," Misato said. She pushed away from the rail and fetched her keys from her pocket. "Any place will do for a meeting, but it needs to happen fast. The longer we wait the higher the chances we could be exposed." She paused, knowing she was making a compromise she could not back out of. "I'm trusting you, Agent Nakajima. We work for each other now."



“Hey, Stupid Shinji, pay attention!”

“I’m paying attention!” Shinji’s eyes snapped open, and he sat a little straighter on the tiny wooden bench as Asuka came back into the changing room holding a two piece red swimsuit.

Strangely, he did not remember dozing off, just closing his eyes. What he did remember was agreeing to go shopping with Asuka after school and thinking it would be a good idea. Surely, it wouldn’t take very long. There just weren’t many shops left in the city. But the sheer amount of time it took for Asuka to pick something, ask his opinion, change in and out of it, and pick something else had convinced him he’d made a huge mistake.

He had also miscalculated the fact that her NERV ID gave her unlimited access to the mass transit system, and so the shopping wasn’t limited by something as trivial as geography.

“What about this one?” Asuka held out the swimsuit for him to look at. To his untrained eyes, it looked like little more than several triangular patches of strategically placed material, held together by some string.

Even though he imagined there was probably a law somewhere forbidding girls of Asuka’s age to wear something so revealing, Shinji was smart enough to know the answer she expected.

“Uh, it looks good.”

“That’s what you said last time!” Asuka fixed him with a huffy frown and threw her arm around the fitting room, where the clothes she had already tried and rejected lay discarded in big piles. “You like everything, even the ugly stuff! Come on, what’s the use in having a man around if he never has an opinion?”

Shinji glanced towards the pink blouse she had tried on before, now crumpled in a heap beneath her bare feet. "It did look good! It's not my fault!"

"Idiot!" Asuka shifted her weight and pointed a finger. "You're an elite Eva pilot. You should be more discriminating!"

She had him there. His taste in clothes was as mundane as hers was flamboyant. Yet another contradiction in their personalities; Asuka dressed to attract attention, Shinji wished to avoid doing just that.

"Well, don't you think it's a little . . ." He held up his thumb and index finger about an inch from each other.

Asuka raised the bikini for inspection. "But it's really fashionable," she mused, a hand on her hip. After the pink blouse she had gone back to her school uniform. She stood there with her shirt untucked and only enough buttons done to cover her bra, the shoulder straps of her jumper hanging down at her sides.

"And, um, you already have a bikini," Shinji reminded her. Against all odds, he might actually win this argument.

"I look like a little girl wearing that thing," Asuka pouted. "This one's for women. Grown women. And it doesn't have that damn zipper on the top."

That's probably meant as a convenient easy access feature, Shinji thought. His mind quickly provided him with a reference picture of her posing in her candy-striped two-piece bikini. It was . . . pleasant.

"But you look really good in your old one," Shinji managed. "And the colors kinda suit you, too. I may not know anything about fashion, but I know what I like. And if it still fits, I don't see why you should go change it."

“Yeah, you’re right,” Asuka said. “You don’t know anything about fashion. I’m gonna try it on.” Spinning around, she slipped into one of the small fitting stalls and shut the curtain behind her.

“By the way, would you mind cleaning up? This place is a mess.”

Shinji rose to his feet with a sigh and spent the next few minutes picking up the rejected items off the floor. All the while he could hear her moving around inside the stall. He was working on getting a skirt back into the plastic clips of a hanger when Asuka drew open the curtain. Heat bloomed on his face so quickly he wondered how he didn’t catch fire.

It was worse than he thought. The bikini might have looked sexy on a fully-grown woman, but on Asuka it looked downright lewd. The triangles on the top were not even big enough to cover her breasts while the bottom was held in place only by thin strings knotted below her hips and slung so low it almost showed ... her.

Forget about her actually wearing that in public, how was he supposed to stand next to her while she wore it? People would think she was some kind of exhibitionist, and who knew what they would think of him!

Unable to find words to describe such embarrassment, Shinji just stared.

“What?” Asuka looked down at herself.
“It covers everything, right?”

And then she turned around.

Shinji made a choking noise as his face turned the color of the neural connectors nestled in Asuka’s hair. The back of the bikini, if it could even be called that, was just a string vanishing between a set of round pink buttocks. There was nothing actually covering her.

Asuka pressed her lips thoughtfully. “Your face is really red,” she said with the kind of exaggerated innocence that came with knowing one was being really naughty. “Is that a good sign?”

More like a sign I’m going to start shooting blood out of my nose like a cartoon, Shinji thought. *That, or have a heart attack.*

“I . . . I don’t think . . .” he stammered, holding the hanging skirt in front of him as if that would somehow help her regain some modesty. “It’s . . . um . . .”

“Or maybe not.” Asuka grinned from ear to ear, but she quickly realized the effect she was having and returned to the fitting room. Her breasts swayed delicately in the precarious grasp of the bikini as the bounce of her bottom became a shameful magnet for his gaze. By the time she slid the curtain shut behind her again, the image of her near-nude body was burned in his brain.

When Asuka re-emerged, she’d gone back to wearing her uniform, the lewd bikini now balled up in one hand.

“Well, I guess that takes care of me,” she said happily, tossing the bikini aside as she approached him. “That just leaves you.”

Shinji was still staring, his face only slightly less red than before. “H-Huh?”

“You, stupid!” Asuka poked a finger against his collarbone, then flicked it down, signaling his school uniform.

“Boring stuff was fine for you when you were on your own, but I won’t be caught dead next to someone so dull. I have standards. So we’re going to have to do something about your wardrobe.”

Shinji fidgeted. “But—”

That was as far as he got before Asuka snatched the skirt and hanger out of his hands, grabbed him by the wrist and shoved him into the stall. “No buts!”

He tried to resist mostly out of instinct, knowing all the while it was a battle, like many others when it came to Asuka, that he could not win.

“Take off your clothes,” she said, shutting the curtain and leaving him alone in the tiny space. “I’ll go pick something out for you.”

Shinji stood there dumbstruck for a moment. Looking around he noticed the stall was not as messy as the fitting room outside. There was a small rack holding the outfits Asuka had actually liked, including a short white dress with red frills along the hem and ribbon-style shoulder straps. Her shoes were carefully placed in the corner, the socks stuffed inside. A full-length mirror hung on the wall to his left.

He caught his reflection and felt even more awkward and out of place. This wasn’t really his thing, but would there be any point in telling Asuka? She’d make a fuss, raise her voice and he’d still end up doing what she wanted.

Shinji sighed heavily, watching himself deflate in the mirror, dark blue eyes closing briefly. He didn’t have a choice, did he? It was easier to give in than argue with Asuka. Moving on automatic, following the redhead’s instructions, he began to undress.

When he was down to his underwear, he turned to the mirror again. Despite his timid personality and usually submissive manner, he was not overtly scrawny. His Evangelion training had also helped in that department.

Seeing himself made him awfully self-conscious. He brushed a hand through his short brown hair,

feeling sheepish and embarrassed just to be standing there. Then he heard Asuka on the other side.

His heart skipped a beat.

“Asuka, wait!” he cried out, cowering hurriedly with his arms across his chest. “Don’t open the curtain!”

Asuka’s response was an incensed “What?” This was followed by her slinging some clothes over the top of the curtain rod. The curtain itself remained thankfully closed.

Shinji reached up for the clothes she had selected and dressed quickly. He looked at himself in the mirror again. The boy he saw standing in front of him not only seemed slightly older than he felt, but also much more handsome. Asuka had picked out a nice white collared shirt with a blue stripe running down the left side and blue sleeves along with a pair of khaki cargo shorts with blue lining inside the pockets. Somehow, she had guessed his size perfectly.

“You done?” Asuka’s voice came from beyond the curtain.

“Yeah,” Shinji murmured. “You can—”

The curtain drew open and Asuka stood there, her eyes moving up and down his body, appraising him. The grin on her face broadened with every inch her gaze took in. Arms folded across her chest, she seemed very pleased.

“I knew you could pull it off. Pretty handsome, huh?”

Shinji blushed at the compliment, looking away from her and reaching up to tug at the button of his collar.

“Yeah,” he managed shyly. “Thanks.”

“You really don’t give yourself enough credit, Third Child.” Asuka stepped inside, almost nestling against him and glancing at his reflection over his shoulder. “Oh yeah, those are nice.”

Shinji almost gasped at the sight. There was a couple looking back at them, a stunning redheaded girl with blazing blue eyes standing next to the brown-haired boy he had seen before. They looked so strange together and yet there they were, boyfriend and girlfriend. But even those terms failed to describe what he saw. Standing with her like this just seemed like a dream.

Asuka's thoughts must have been moving along similar lines. Her hand twitched in the mirror and he felt it take his, the warmth of her touch radiant in the cold room. He jerked instinctively but she held on tightly. Her face suddenly turned serious.

A knot of worry formed in Shinji's stomach. "I-I'm sorry," he said. "I'm still new at this, um, touching thing. It's just ..."

"It's not that." Asuka's voice was flat, the emotions behind it carefully controlled. "But ... Well, there's something I want to talk to you about. Not clothes. Something important."

Shinji took an awkward gulp to prevent the knot from moving further up. "Asuka?"

"Come with me."

She pulled him out of the stall, turned him around and pushed him back onto the bench he had occupied before. Then she stood in front of him in her usual "big girl" pose, feet firmly planted and apart, hands on hips. The expression on her face remained very serious.

"I know this is going to sound crazy," Asuka started after taking a breath, "and maybe I am crazy. I don't know. But I thought I should tell you because we're both Eva pilots and because of something you said before—when I asked you what your Eva felt like. Do you remember what I said?"

Shinji nodded. Of course he remembered.

“You said it was empty.”

“Are you stupid? I said it felt empty.” Asuka dropped her eyebrows into a scowl. “I don’t exactly know why it felt that way, but I know it isn’t. Because . . .” she paused, and suddenly she didn’t seem sure at all. “Do you remember what you said your Eva felt like?”

“Nice,” Shinji recalled, wondering where she was going with this. They hadn’t talked much about their Evas, and with good reason considering the last battle.

“After that! You said it felt like a mother’s embrace, remember?”

“Yeah.” He also remembered she had seemed quite upset afterwards.

Asuka tensed her shoulders, lifting up her nose as she tilted her head back. “Shinji, I think I know why it feels that way. During the last battle—I don’t know what happened, but I saw a lot of awful things. It was just like another nightmare. Something was trying to break me. But I killed it. And then . . .” she stopped again, and Shinji could actually see her courage wavering.

“I saw my mother inside Unit-02.”

“Your mother?” Shinji stared up at her. “Like a hallucination?”

“I don’t know.” Asuka shook her head.

“It felt . . . real. It WAS real.”

He knew those words didn’t make any sense—they couldn’t. Asuka’s mother was dead, the same as his. She had even cried about it. And yet . . . it did not sound crazy at all.

A part of him wasn’t even surprised, as if she were simply giving words to a feeling he himself had long ago. During the last battle he’d felt something as well; the same sensation he always thought protected him in the entry-plug. And he heard her voice.

She, whether his mother or just Unit-01, had wanted to unleash its power and save him. When he refused for fear of hurting Asuka, he felt its grief wash over him. Felt its rage. Its power.

Once he had spent a whole month trapped inside Unit-01, and while he had forgotten most of the experience, now that he focused on the sensations attached to it, Shinji found he could recall it very clearly. The sensations had names and occupied very well defined places in his heart. He had been too young before his mother died and so could not remember that part of the connection, but Unit-01 felt like he thought his own mother had.

Have I always known? Right from the very first time I piloted Eva?

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?” Asuka piped up, bringing him out of his reverie. Her uncertainty quickly boiled over into anger. “Well, fine. Sorry I said anything!”

Shinji lifted his gaze, which had slipped to the floor without him realizing it. “No, I—”

“You what?” Asuka’s thin eyebrows were so close together they made a V in the middle of her forehead.

“I think you might be right,” Shinji finished, somehow. “Unit-01, it—she, I think. She feels like ...” he drew a blank, unable to find the right words, or indeed any words which could describe the feeling.

“Your mother?” Asuka asked, her harsh manner easing a bit as she recognized how hard this was for him. “That’s it, isn’t it? That’s what it feels like. And deep down you know it, don’t you?”

Shinji nodded silently, an empty ache in his chest reminding him of that person who had been missing from his life for so long, whom he desperately wanted to be with again. For some reason he didn’t understand, he couldn’t just tell Asuka that.

“Do you think it’s really possible?” she said. “That they—”

“I don’t know.” Shinji shook his head.

Asuka gestured impatiently. “Well, don’t you know how the Evas are supposed to work?”

“Do you?”

Asuka didn’t have an answer. She seemed as lost as he felt. Her hands moved away from her hips as her posture changed, the confidence draining out of it like so much fake pretense.

The silence bothered him. He brought his legs up, pressing his knees against chest protectively and wrapping his arms around them. His voice sounded impossibly small the next time he spoke. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

He was ready for her to call him a little boy again, because right then and there he knew he was. The handsome young man he had seen in the mirror didn’t really exist. He was just a boy, afraid and lonely and lost.

“Are you going to sulk now?” Asuka was serious but not reproachful. “Because I made you talk about your mother?”

He said nothing. Asuka regarded him sternly for a moment, then sighed loudly and sat on the bench next to him. She leaned close.

“Do you want to know what my Mama was like?” Asuka’s voice turned airy, almost dreamy. “She was the prettiest woman I’ve ever known. But she was smart, too. Of course, she would have to be to work for NERV.” Her warmth moved in on him comfortably as she placed a hand on his shoulder, making him flinch.

“What about yours?”

Her other hand worked its way on top of his. Without any conscious thought on his part, his fingers spread open and interlaced with hers. She wasn't demanding to know, at least that was the sense he got. Asuka demanded lots of things constantly, but this was not one of them. She wanted him to share this with her.

Holding her hand, Shinji tried to put a lifetime of emotions into words.

"I was too young to remember very well," he said quietly. "But I think ... She was the kindest person I've ever met. Her smile always made me happy. Made me want to smile." He rubbed his free hand over his eyes, just in case. But there were no tears. Surprisingly, the memories were not sad ones, just emotional and powerful.

Asuka sat quietly for a moment, then asked, "Do you miss her?"

Shinji did. He missed her a lot, and now that he was talking about her, he missed her more than he had in a long time, but rather than say it he simply nodded in silence.

"I miss my Mama, too." Asuka squeezed his hand. "I'm glad I'm not the only one. But, you know, she once told me I was special and I took it to heart. So, I spent most of my life trying to remain special, and when I couldn't, it was like a part of me died—whatever part was left after I lost her. I didn't want to live anymore. I just wanted to disappear. But I was wrong. I'm not too proud to admit that. I understand better now. She's the one that made me special. And that is not something I can ever lose. I think your mother made you special, too."

When he said nothing, she pulled his hand towards her until it was pressed against her chest. "Shinji, look at me."

Shinji raised his head and focused his gaze on her. The smile showing on her face was so beautiful he could hardly comprehend it.

“We didn’t lose them,” Asuka said. “We never did. They were always there, always looking after us. That’s how it felt even from the beginning. We were just too hurt to know what the feeling was. Kinda like with each other. We’re just really bad at this sort of thing.”

“But—”

“Don’t get me wrong.” Asuka cut him off, and for once he was thankful she did because he had no idea what he wanted to say. “I was so happy to get a chance to see her again. I would have stayed with her if I could have. But she sent me back. And I promised her that I would try to be happy here, too. And that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Shinji understood at last. The way she had been behaving since the battle, how things that would have infuriated her before now seemed like minor offenses; how she was more talkative and open and generally approachable, and much more likable. It didn’t mean she was magically a different person, or that the terrible wounds she’d suffered, emotional and otherwise, had healed. She would always be scarred on the inside. The same as him. But . . .

He looked around at the messy fitting room and it was as though he saw it for the first time. This was part of Asuka’s idea of happiness, he realized. And she had included him in it.

Suddenly going shopping with her didn’t seem so tiresome.

A few nights ago, Misato had told him he might never know what Asuka wanted out of their relationship. She meant well, but she was wrong. He did know. Asuka just wanted to be happy with him,

and even if perhaps such a thing was ultimately impossible, she was determined to try. And if she could, so could he. Because he wanted to be happy with her as well.

He was sure his own mother, wherever she was, would approve. She might even be proud of him. His chest felt a little fuller.

Sensing the change in his mood, Asuka stood up. Still holding his hand, she pulled him up after her. “So,” she pouted innocently, “you really don’t like the bikini?”

His dark blue eyes flickered with confusion.

Talking to her about his mother had hardly set him at ease. Many issues were yet to be resolved between them, and maybe they would never be—the mystery with their Evas being only one. But he felt that he had found a kind of soothing reassurance in their shared past and loss. Of Asuka and the girl she was, of her companionship and their bond through their Evas.

Apparently, however, that epiphany did not extend to her taste in swimwear. Probably for the best. There was no telling what she could get away with if he left it up to her.

“Um ... no, it’s just too ...”

Asuka considered, lips pressed thoughtfully. “How about I don’t wear it in public? That’s what bothers you, right?”

“Not in public?” Shinji repeated, his throat going dry at the thought of her lounging around the apartment wearing such a skimpy thing. But she obviously wanted the bikini, and it was better than the alternative. “Okay.”

“It’s a deal.” Asuka grinned victoriously, having once again gotten her way. Then she looked him over again. “You look really good in those clothes. Are you gonna keep them?”

He had to admit he agreed. He did look good, but also more mature and confident, like the person he was trying to grow into. And Asuka must have known that as well, since she'd picked them out for him. Had he been a little more daring he might have kissed her in gratitude. He settled for squeezing her hand, and she squeezed back. "Yeah. I like them."

"Alright. I knew you had to have some sense in that thick head of yours."

Only Asuka could insult and flatter him at the same time, and only because it was her did he not feel offended. He held her hand just a little longer, until she loosened her grip. As they separated, they let their fingers brush together to the very last moment.

Asuka had a faint rosy flush on her cheeks Shinji had not noticed before as she picked up the bikini and examined it closely. "It's so tiny," she murmured absently. "But I've made up my mind."

"Well, you could always pick a different one," Shinji suggested.

"Nah." Something mischievous flickered in the depths of Asuka's blue eyes. "I'm gonna have a lot of fun with this. Hey, would you consider the pool down in Central Dogma as a public place? It's technically not."

Before his imagination could supply him an image daring enough to make him pass out, Shinji decided a change of subject was very much needed. "I ... think we should pay for something before they kick us out," he said, looking around at the big mess they—mostly Asuka—had made.

"Yeah, okay."

The sun was setting slowly in the western sky by the time they finished taking care of their purchases. The street bustled with people heading to and from. This far away from Tokyo-3, there were no signs anywhere of the devastation the city had suffered.

In typical fashion, the first thing Asuka did as they stepped out was complain. “Mein Gott, how can it be so hot this late in the day?” She fanned herself with her hand. “I’m sweating. I hate sweating!”

“It’s not just the heat, it’s the humidity,” Shinji explained, for entirely unexplainable reasons. “All that water in the lakes, millions of cubic tons, gets stuck in the atmosphere—”

“Oh, give it a rest,” Asuka said in her most high-pitched voice. “I refuse to be seen with such a dork. You don’t want to be a dork when you are with me, do you?” She looped her arm under his and drew him to her, trapping him against her flank.

For a brief second, Shinji’s reflex caused him to tense against her touch. But unlike before, Asuka didn’t seem the least bit upset and the sensation promptly evaporated.

“I guess not,” he said.

Asuka picked up her pace, tugging his arm insistently. “Keep up!”

*Easy for her to say, Shinji thought.
She’s not the one carrying all the bags.*

But he let her lead him down the sidewalk without protest.

Whether home or to the next shop, it didn’t matter.

He had never felt more content to be with her anywhere she went.

And so they hurried along, just two more smiling children in the crowd.





The intense orange glow of LCL rippled across the glass of the observation window as Ritsuko glanced into the large flooded vault beyond.

Secured by heavy reinforced steel cables and illuminated by large square spotlights, Unit-02 loomed from the depths like some ancient drowned giant. Most of its armor above the waist had been removed, exposing its unnaturally slender brownish form and revealing the spherical core which protruded from its chest. And there, just above the core, clinging to it with dark fleshy tendrils, lay the object of Ritsuko's attention.

She had never doubted the Emerald Tablet could alter the Evangelion's DNA at a very fundamental level. Her mother's own notes made it clear the program's understanding of the genome and its string sequencing extended far beyond anything NERV could manipulate. Yet despite having seen the Tablet turn three Evangelions into monsters and knowing that it was possible, she had still been surprised to find it had somehow managed to produce a functional, although primitive, S2 engine.

In theory, as long as there was sufficient biological material, an Evangelion could regenerate missing parts. The Tablet did not seem to have that constraint. S2 Engines couldn't be created out of nothing, at least not by any engineering methods NERV possessed. But the Eva carried in its genome the genetic instructions to create one.

Unit-A had been under the Tablet's control long enough that its S2 engine was nearly fully-developed, but by the time Ritsuko got to it, it had deteriorated to dust. Unit-08 had been ripped apart much too

quickly to allow any development.

Unit-02, however, had been altered just enough to produce something which, so far, seemed stable enough.

As she watched, half a dozen divers came into view, carrying between them six large metal needles attached to cables.

“Move the probes to the insertion points along the up-down axis,” Ritsuko ordered. “Give me a voltage check when you’re done.”

Behind her, two technicians gave their acknowledgement. The divers swam into positions, placing the needles in a straight vertical line going from the top of the tumor, which was roughly the size of a human torso. Ritsuko had been worried about possible damage to the S2 engine, but over the last week this was the best method she could come up with.

“Probes are in place,” one of the technicians said. “Voltage is nominal, well within established safety parameters.”

Ritsuko nodded; it was what she expected. Although the intelligence behind it had disappeared, the biological changes created by the Tablet remained functional because Unit-02 remained functional. Having already reloaded its operating system from scratch, buffered the neural interface and isolated anything else that might produce feedback, the actual biological components were the only carryover from the battle. Unit-01 assimilating an S2 engine by eating it was the equivalent of receiving an organ transplant, but this was more like growing your own organs.

She could, of course, have it removed. Unit-02 with unlimited power would be as fearsome a weapon as Unit-01, and maybe more so given its pilot’s tendencies towards battle and violence.

But Ritsuko wasn’t worried about that.

The Eva’s biggest weakness was not its limited power supply.

“Asuka will be delighted,” Ritsuko said, turning to the technicians behind her. “I see no reason to keep Unit-02 in lock down any longer. Unit-01 will retain combat priority until we have successfully reactivated Unit-02.”

The technicians exchanged worried glances. Ritsuko knew that the idea of rearming Unit-02 did not sit well with a lot of people. Some, she suspected, resented Asuka herself more than they did her Eva, but such emotions were harbored out of ignorance. Keeping Unit-02 down here was impractical and Ritsuko had a great many other things to worry about.





Shinji looked up from his homework just as Misato walked out of her room, zipping the back of her black cocktail dress. Sitting next to him, Asuka looked up as well. She had volunteered to help him, a rare occurrence in itself, and for the last twenty minutes twirling a pencil in her fingers and pointing out mistakes while he scratched his against the paper.

Pen-Pen also looked, but he was not interested and went back to the program on the television.

“What do you think?” Misato said, striking a pose in front of them and smoothing out the sides of the dress with her hands.

“I haven’t worn this in so long. Does it still fit?”

“You look . . . nice, Misato.” Shinji stared at her chest, exactly the effect its designers had had in mind. Probably. The tight fit lifted up her already-plentiful bosom, enhancing the round shapes to proportions that would catch anyone’s eyes. The dress was also very short, only coming down to about an inch short of mid-thigh.

Asuka mumbled something, and then quickly returned to pretending she was helping with Shinji’s homework. And just to make sure Shinji did so too, she nudged him forcefully.

“Divide the coefficient by the exponent after you add one to it, stupid, not before.”

“Okay, thanks.” Shinji turned his attention back to his homework, but not before it lingered on Misato just another second.

His guardian moved closer, coming to stand in front of the living room table. Close enough for Shinji, and no doubt for Asuka, to smell her perfume. It was not a scent she used often, but it certainly added to the sultry image she seemed intent on projecting.

“Don’t stay up too late.” Misato said after taking a moment to look at them. “I’ll be out for a while. Oh, and Asuka, make sure he actually finishes his homework.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Asuka said, a hint of impatience in her voice. “Whatever. Shinji couldn’t do integrals without me. I’ll probably have to finish it for him.” She frowned. “Where are you going, anyway?”

“Um, Asuka, I don’t think—” Shinji started, but Asuka quickly cut him off.

“That it’s any of our business? Come on, Third. She’s our guardian. Leaving us and not saying where she’s going is borderline neglect. And what if there were an Angel attack? We wouldn’t be able to find her.”

Misato, to her credit, took Asuka’s belligerence in stride. “I just gotta take care of some boring work related stuff,” she explained patiently. “Call my cell phone if you need me. Hopefully, the Angels won’t be pesky enough to attack for the next few hours.”

“Work?” Asuka snorted. “Dressed like that, you must be moonlighting in a brothel.”

“Jealous much?” Still not looking at her, Shinji heard the playfulness in Misato’s voice.

“Hardly.”

“Well, it’s not like I blame you.” Misato giggled. “You’re perfectly entitled to it. After all, that oversized t-shirt you’re wearing isn’t so oversized on me.”

“I’m still growing!” Asuka squalled indignantly. “You, on the other hand, have nothing to look forward to except a losing fight with gravity. It’s just a matter of time. Shinji was just staring out of shock at your utter lack of modesty. Tell her, Shinji.”

Predictably, Shinji said nothing, pressing his lips together and finding a problem on the sheet that looked particularly interesting. Asuka punched him on the shoulder.

He rubbed his arm. "Ouch."

"Asuka, don't hit him.

One of these days he's going to hit you back."

Shinji smiled shakily, hoping Asuka didn't think to preempt such a move by hitting him some more. Misato had no idea how unpredictable she could be. Asuka heaved a sigh and leaned heavily on her elbows, her brow drawn into her trademark scowl.

Despite the reaction, however, there just didn't seem to be any real malice behind Asuka's attacks anymore. Certainly nothing like how she had been before. Now, even when she was being difficult, or when she was calling him names, there seemed to be a lightheartedness to her he'd very much learned to understand. Being difficult was simply Asuka's way of being herself.

Shinji realized this was the kind of insight which could only be gained through great pain. He had grown a lot lately, and Asuka had grown with him. And seeing the two of them together must have affected Misato deeply. Teasing aside, their guardian obviously cared for them far beyond the bounds of their custodial relationship. Shinji could never think of her as a mother, especially not after the discussion he'd had with Asuka earlier, but she was the next best thing, and he was glad to have her.

"Alright, I better head out." Misato turned around, using one hand to brush her long, dark hair aside. "Zipper's good? I don't want to be showing more than necessary. I think I got it all the way up."

Shinji didn't dare look, so it fell to Asuka. "Yeah," she said.

Misato flashed them a smile and a V sign, and strode into the kitchen. A few seconds later, they heard the front door opening.

Asuka waited for it to close again before pouncing. She snatched Shinji's notebook away from him in a burst of energy and pushed down on his shoulders until he was pinned to the ground beside the table. As a faint noise of protest escaped his lips, Asuka then crawled on top of him, straddling his waist between her thighs.

"You thought you'd get away with that, huh?" Asuka grumbled, her eyes glaring.

Lying flat on his back like this, it was a miracle Shinji could come up with anything at all to say. "W-what are you talking about?" he sputtered, his voice high with surprise.

"You drooling over her like that!" Asuka leaned forward, both hands on his shoulders. Her weight shifted slightly.

"I wasn't!" Shinji protested. He had to try hard to keep his eyes on hers and not let them wander. In this position her loose shirt hung off her body, revealing more pale skin than normal, and for some reason her slender neck and the little hollow of her collarbone had become incredibly inviting.

"Come ON," Asuka growled. "Is my body not good enough? You think I'm ugly or immature or something?"

Shinji shook his head as emphatically as he could. His cheeks were starting to grow warm. "No. You're not—I wasn't. Not like that. I just kinda noticed she had a nice dress. I didn't mean anything by it!"

"Wouldn't you rather have me in that dress?" Asuka sat back onto him, freeing a hand which she used to brush away locks of his dark hair from his forehead. Her touch was warm. It felt very pleasant. "Or would you rather have me naked?"

Shinji squirmed. "I'm so—"

“Sorry. I know,” Asuka said, placing two fingers over his lips to quiet him. “You never mean to do anything wrong, but you wouldn’t have to apologize so much if you actually used your head. So tell me, how the hell did you think ogling her like that would make me feel?”

Shinji’s throat worked its way around a hard lump, but he didn’t say anything.

“Of course you didn’t think, because you’re just an idiot.” Asuka’s face became increasingly more thoughtful by the second. “She was right. It did make me jealous. But only a bit. Kinda.” She forced herself to smirk. “You probably think this is easy for me—you think maybe I’ve read too many magazines and seen too many TV shows or something. I’m a girl, so I should know how these things go, right?”

It might be unfair, but Shinji had to admit she was right. What else could he do when he wasn’t sure what she really wanted? How could he be sure of anything with her? She was an enigma he’d only recently begun decoding.

“Do you remember how things used to be between us?” Asuka asked.

Shinji nodded his answer.

Asuka bent her head low, bringing her lips so close to his ear that he could feel her breath tickling him. “I don’t blame you if you don’t like going shopping with me,” she said, “or if you think I’m just being dumb and shallow. After everything that happened, I wanted to do something normal. And I wanted you there.”

“I liked going shopping with you,” Shinji blurted out before he could help himself.

“Shut up, stupid.” Asuka pressed her fingers more firmly against his lips. “Things have really changed between you and me,

but I haven't. I'm still Asuka. And that means I won't share you with anyone. Not Misato, no matter what she's wearing, and certainly not Rei. There is no room for compromise in my heart. It's all or nothing. If I can't have that, then I don't want anything from you."

She finally moved her fingers away, and Shinji understood she wanted him to speak.

"Rei is my friend," he said.

Asuka's face twitched. "I don't like her. She's too weird. Too obedient. Too soft. But I can't make you stop being her friend," she said, her voice a low growl. Then she sighed. "It's never been romantic, right?"

If the definition of "romantic" were the feelings he had for Asuka, then no, his feelings for Rei had never been romantic; she was more like a family member. A sister. He loved her, but not in the same way. Shinji shook his head.

"Did you ever kiss her?"

Another shake.

The look on Asuka's face was half relief and half annoyance. "I guess I'll have to trust you on that. As long as I have you all for myself I'll be happy. Only for myself. Because you belong to me. Do you have a problem with that?"

"I want to make you happy," Shinji said, the words coming out of his mouth before he could think them and for once they felt right.

Or at least he thought so. But then Asuka pulled herself away and smacked him on the chest.

"Ow!" Shinji groaned. Reaching to grab the burning spot where she had hit him, he looked up at her with an anguished gaze. "W-what was that for?"

“So you don’t forget!” Asuka pushed him roughly onto his back again and pressed herself against him, her weight flattening her breasts very noticeably against his chest. “This could work,” she murmured in his ear. “And don’t you ever dare tell me I’m too heavy.”

She was a little heavy, but he wasn’t about to say it. He was not that stupid.

“Hmm.” Asuka lowered her head and started nuzzling him as if he were a cushion, her lips brushing the hot skin of his neck. “Do something.”

Like what? Shinji almost asked. He felt suddenly lost, but he also realized that Asuka wouldn’t tell him to do something if she didn’t want him to. Mustering his courage like he often did when charging an Angel in battle, he raised his arms and wrapped them around her, slowly so she’d get a chance to protest if he got it wrong.

Instead of pulling away and yelling at him, Asuka relaxed in his embrace, melting in their shared warmth. He held her a little more tightly.

Once upon a time he would have been so terrified of her that any such act of closeness would be unthinkable. All he could have done was leave her to suffer alone. And Asuka would have hated him for it. He completely misunderstood the nature of her emotions; not hatred but pain, not hostility but loneliness, not arrogance but a desire to be needed. And he needed her, more than he needed anything else in the world.

He would always be afraid of her, it was in his nature. The difference now was that he would not let that fear paralyze him. He could not—their happiness depended on it.

Neither said anything for a while and simply enjoyed the moment. Eventually Shinji realized that Pen-Pen was watching them. He tried not to mind. Then, just when he had gotten used to the silence, the nosy penguin, and the steady beat of Asuka's heart through the thin materials of their shirts, he felt her tense. When she tried to lift herself up on her arms, he let her go.

"Is something wrong?" he asked softly.

"I'm bored," Asuka said. Her face turned serious as she looked down on him. "Misato said she was gonna be out for a while. We could ... you know."

Shinji felt a hitch in his stomach.
Could she really be suggesting that they—

"Come on, I bet it's better than doing your stupid homework." This time her husky tone left no doubt as to Asuka's intentions. "Much better."

"I don't know." Shinji swallowed hard, growing uncomfortable and stiff. In some places more than others.

"Fine. It's not a question then." Asuka seemed almost offended as she slid her hand up the side of his face and knotted her fingers in his hair. Shinji's hands moved loosely around her waist, not holding her but not pushing her away either. He didn't want to push her away. He wanted this moment, and wanted what it meant.

"Okay," he said simply.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Third Child, but there's a part of me that just wants to scream right now." A strangely wistful smile crossed Asuka's face. "I'm still learning to ignore it."

Before Shinji could say anything, Asuka shuffled back on her saddle ... until she was sitting right atop the bulge in his shorts, now pressed firmly and somewhat uncomfortably against the softer mound between her legs. His mouth went dry, the flush of arousal and embarrassment turning his cheeks a bright, hot red. He couldn't take his eyes off hers. For such a mouthy girl, those blue orbs said more than any words ever could.

He saw desire there, obviously, but also loneliness and insecurity and all the things she could never tell him.

Shinji flinched and gave out a little squeak as Asuka ground her pelvis on him, placing more of her weight on his groin as if to remind him that, despite this being an act of mutual consent, she remained on top, in charge. But giving in always came naturally and easily for him. He hardly needed any additional persuasion.

"God, Asuka ..."

"I like it when you say my name like that," Asuka purred, swiveling her pelvis again. "It sounds so special."

Shinji gasped, enjoying the pressure and motion of her body on his own. His heart raced wildly in his chest, making him aware of every throbbing beat and hot pulse.

"Last chance to back out, Shinji," Asuka said, firmly lowering herself over him. Her pretty face filled his vision; her breath tickled him; her slim fingers tensed in his hair and he had the feeling she was ready to tear it out should he give her the wrong answer.

"I-I'm not running away," Shinji stammered despite himself.

Asuka smiled sharply.

"No, I didn't think you would. You've always been braver than you look."

Shinji knew that wasn't really true. And when she finally brought her hungry lips down on his, he closed his eyes.





The night was warm and humid, and no stars were visible in the cloud-layered sky. Somewhere in the distance, the cicadas chirped their incessant song.

As Misato climbed into her vintage Alpine, she opened the glove compartment and retrieved a large manila envelope. She placed it on the passenger's seat. Then she made sure to check her gun. She was hoping for the best, but there was no point in being foolish.

Nakajima had arranged to meet his man in a bar just off the main highway running between Tokyo-3 and the nearby town of Hakone. From what Misato heard it was a fairly well traveled place, with plenty of parking and a large neon sign on the front. It was farther than she would have liked, but otherwise she was satisfied with the arrangement. A public place meant safety. Nobody, not even the Americans, would dare try anything if there were witnesses involved.

And it usually works in the movies, Misato remembered thinking. I can probably get us a seat by the window, too.

That was still a few hours away, however. Before then she had something else to do.

Pulling out of the building's parking lot, she drove to the nearest gate to the Geo-Front. Soon she was underground, the vast structures that made up Central Dogma illuminated with strings of light in the dark cavern appearing on her windshield. The domed ceiling above created a pitch black sky. The buildings that had made up Tokyo-3 downtown remained inverted as work continued to drain out the lake above them created by Rei's detonation.

By Rei's death.

Her destination was a small, out of the way melon patch located off an emergency road. She had not been coming here as often as she should have, and the melons had started to shrivel. Some were clearly dead already. In the beams of her headlamps, they looked green and brown.

But she wasn't here to make amends for her neglect. Misato stayed in the car, her hands wrapped around her steering wheel. "Kaji," she murmured softly. "This is the right thing, isn't it?"

No answer. She hadn't expected any.

"You told me to move ahead. To look for the truth. I didn't. I stayed behind, and those I am responsible for suffered. It was up to me, but I didn't do anything. I failed Shinji. I failed Asuka. Everyone. I'm sure if you were here I would make you sick."

She laid her head against the steering wheel. "I told Shinji he might regret falling in love. But what I regret is not accepting that I was in love. I regret leaving you, and then I regret not being able to help. I'm sorry for a lot of things, and that's one of them. But maybe I still have time to make some of those things right. I need to do something. If I'm wrong I hope you forgive me. I hope Asuka and Shinji forgive me. This is all I can do."

Misato shut off the engine and waited. The beams of her headlight died and plunged the melon patch into darkness. As time went on and ten minutes turned into twenty, then thirty, then an hour, she resisted the urge to call and check up on her children.

Her children—the thought brought a small smile to her face. It made the waiting easier.

It was almost midnight when she started the car again and headed back to the surface and onto an empty highway.

Her sense of direction was famously bad, and often the butt of jokes among her staff, but Misato had no problem finding the right exit despite not being familiar with this area.

The huge neon sign in purple and day-glow green helped, too.

Unit-01's colors, she thought.

Misato parked her car in front of the bar where she'd be able to see it from the large windows, then slipped her gun into her purse and brought both it and the envelope with her. As a final detail, she also made sure to iron out the wrinkles in her dress. Asuka could criticize her choice of outfit all she wanted, but the tight fit and short hem would help create the impression that she was unarmed and exposed.

It wasn't until she was walking on the sidewalk that she noticed the man sitting in one of the cars parked across the street, and that the car, the usual nondescript black sedan, had no tags. She wasn't surprised.

Nakajima had told her his contact had agreed to come alone as a show of trust, but Misato never really believed it. Nakajima was bringing Miko, and with Misato, he must have realized he would be outnumbered and outgunned if the meeting went wrong. She wondered how many times a guy like him could have done something like this. She'd been able to find very little on him beyond his public profile, and even less about Echelon.

What she did find was distressing. Before Second Impact, Echelon had been largely an offshoot of the NSA monitoring communications and gathering information similarly, more hackers than soldiers. But after America's post-Impact realignment, the rumors indicated they'd become a lot more.

SFOD-D and SOCOM still did all the dirty work, of course.

They were the ones with the guns and received all the headlines.

But Echelon had the brains ... and they were never mentioned. Almost as if they didn't really exist.

And now Misato was going to make them do what she wanted.

Nakajima and Miko were waiting for her at the bar's entrance. Misato felt a pang of nostalgia when she saw them together, remembering how Kaji and her used to spend whole nights out on the town. He was dressed casually in sneakers, jeans and a shirt. It was the first time she ever saw him out of his stuffy uniform. He was handsome, she couldn't lie to herself. Another place and another time there might have been something there. Not now. Miko looked like an experienced clubber: short skirt, pink blouse, makeup, and heels.

"Hello, Major," Nakajima called out, waving her over. "Almost didn't see you in that fancy dress. Black is definitely your color."

"No ranks tonight, Nakajima," Misato replied, walking closer, her heels clicking on the pavement. "Got that, Miko?"

Miko nodded. "Yes, ah ... Miss Katsuragi."

"Misato, please," Misato corrected. Then she turned to Nakajima. "You noticed our friend across the parking lot?"

To his credit, he did not try to look. "Yes. Probably backup. Keeping their distance so we don't get spooked."

"That's what I thought," Misato said.

"Well, Americans are nothing if not cautious." Nakajima shrugged. "Should we go inside?"

"You can spot the guy, so I'll be right behind you."

Nakajima had no objection to this. He led the way. Inside, the bar was dark and almost empty.

There was no music playing, only the clanging of glasses and bottles being passed around. The smell of alcohol and cigarettes was thick in the air. With Misato and Miko following, Nakajima looked around, carefully scanning the faces on the tables and booths and finally picked a direction towards the rear.

So much for sitting near the window, Misato thought with some disappointment. She'd have to make sure to check her car before they left.

They ended up sitting across from a short, middle-aged Japanese man, wearing a suit. He looked like the sort who would blend in anywhere, and aside from his clear gray-green eyes would have been indistinct from the hordes of salarymen everywhere around Japan.

"Major Katsuragi, it's so nice to meet you." The man rose to his feet and shook Misato's hand. "My name is Hidetoshi Sato. But I'm sure Junichi has already told you that."

"Very nice to meet you," Misato said as pleasantly as she could.

"And this lovely lady?" Sato asked, looking Miko over.

"Miko Mineguno," Nakajima said.

"She's the guardian of the girl I mentioned before."

"Oh yes, such a terrible thing."

Sato's voice was full of sympathy, but his face remained neutral.

"I gather our Unit-08 had something to do with it." He gave Misato a frown. "These Evangelions are dreadful things. No offense, Major."

Misato was not about to disagree, but she had more important things to discuss. "Let's get down to it, shall we?"

"Very well," Sato sat back on his chair, fixing his eyes squarely on Misato as the three of them took their seats across from him.

“From what I understand, you want to offer me a deal. An offer I can’t refuse, I suppose? I have to admit I did not expect that you would come. Why would you? You yourself have nothing to gain. My deal was for Nakajima and the girls.”

“I want another deal,” Misato said, meeting his gaze with a steely resolve. “I want asylum for myself, the Second Child, and the Third Child.”

Sato laughed. “NERV will never let the children go.”

Misato’s expression hardened. “I don’t care about what NERV will or will not do. I am telling you what I want. And in exchange I will tell you everything I know. Yes. That is why you wanted to talk to me in the first place, right? Even though, as you said, it was Nakajima who wanted a deal. I supposed you were ready to make concessions to him, so you can do the same thing for me.”

“Six people for one testimony doesn’t seem fair,” Sato said. “Three I could have managed.”

“Five people.”

Misato placed her manila envelope on the table.

Sato offered an amused look. He took the envelope and slipped its contents on the table. Misato allowed herself a smile. Sato picked up the passport and examined it. On the cover, it showed the eagle, arrows and olive branches of the Shield of the United States shimmering in gold-leaf etching.

“The Second Child is an American citizen,” Misato said firmly, watching him as he flipped through the pages. “Her father is native born. And under the Post-Impact Constitution of 2006 and the Rice Act, she is entitled to refugee status if she should request it, and, by extension, the protection of the American military.

But she is a minor and so, as her legal guardian, that authority extends to me. Those are your own laws, Mr. Sato. ”

Sato carefully held the passport against the light to examine its watermark. “Why not just go to the embassy?”

“You know why,” Nakajima interrupted. “The least useful thing in this sort of situation is diplomatic red tape. And it takes time. When the government finds out what our intentions are they will not hesitate to go after the children.”

“And there’s no telling what Commander Ikari might do,” Misato added.

Sato pressed his lips together. “The United States will, of course, honor her responsibility to her citizen.” He looked at Misato. “And if you provide information, then we will take care of you. No bureaucracy. No red tape. The Third Child is a different issue. He is a Japanese national.”

“The Third Child will go or there is no deal. You have no idea how important that is.” Misato leaned forward. “Shinji means the world to me. He is the reason for this little meeting and this deal.”

For a moment, Sato seemed to lower his guard. “I know. I have a son too. Your position is not a very enviable one, I’ll grant you that.”

“Then you know what it feels like to fear for those you love, to want to protect them.”

Sato shook his head. “It is still not enough. My superiors will never be able to justify it, and neither can I. Taking the Second Child out of the equation, moves like this need to be measured by what we have to gain versus what we have to lose. I cannot simply go up the chain and ask my superiors to provide hospitality to five Japanese citizens out of the kindness of their hearts. I need more to work with here.”

Misato drew her eyebrows together.

“Then what else do you want?”

“Your testimony,” Sato said, “and the children’s.”

“No. Absolutely not. I will not have those children interrogated.”

“You misunderstand.” Sato shook his head slowly.

“It would be more like a debriefing.

We would treat them like witnesses, not criminals.”

Misato had half a mind to walk out. She pointed a finger at Sato.

“Call it whatever you want, but it’s not acceptable.”

“Listen,” Nakajima interrupted, “I really don’t think it’s a good idea to put these children through anything like that. I’ve seen what happens when they pilot the Evangelion . . . all that pain, all that anger. The whole point of this is to spare them. And you want to stick them in a room with a cot and a table and ask them questions day and night?”

“I won’t let Keiko be interrogated either,” Miko said.

“It would be a waste of your time anyway,” Misato growled, still angry. “They are just pilots. Child soldiers. They are victims in all this—you have no idea. What could you possibly want to learn from them? Your engineers have built and tested Evangelions. You even got rid of Unit-08 because it was too much of a liability, right? So then what?”

“We are not interested in the Evangelion in the same way you are,” Sato conceded. “We are not like the Russians or the Chinese, either. It has no value to us as a weapon. Under the direction of the UN we have already built three—surrendered two, and one took the lives of thousands of our people. No, Major, we don’t care about the Eva itself. We want to know what it is, and where the hell it came from. We want the truth.”

Finally, it all made sense to Misato. “Liar,” she said. “The truth has no relevance to you people. You want to destroy the UN. You want to prove to the world what piloting the Evangelion does to people because of how much the UN has invested in it and supported it. It would make them look like murderers and war criminals, correct?”

“Let’s say you are not entirely wrong.”

“And since you gave up yours,” Misato continued, “it would make you look like you care, like you are unwilling to risk lives for power. It would make you the good guys. Well, I can help with that. I’ll provide you with more dirt on the UN than you can imagine. Going back to Second Impact. There is no need to get the children involved. And there is no need to lie because you don’t think I’d agree with your motives. As far as the UN goes, I do agree.”

“Men lie for many reasons,” Sato said. “How can I be sure that you are not the liar? How can I be sure that everything you have told me is not just a bluff or a trap? I have no more reason to trust you than you do to trust me. And after tonight, I probably shouldn’t.”

“We probably shouldn’t either,” Misato said with a stiff shrug. “Come on. It’s a nice speech and everything, almost like a real bureaucrat, but if you really cared about trust you would have stuck to our agreement.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Sato replied.

“Not alone,” Nakajima said, speaking what Misato was thinking. “We saw your men outside.”

“Yeah, they stick out like sore thumbs,” Miko sounded upset.

Sato frowned and glanced pointedly around the table, from her to Nakajima to Misato. “What are you talking about? My soldiers are invisible. Those guys out there—only Section 2 can be that obvious.”

A sudden chill ran down Misato's spine. She exchanged a horrified look with Nakajima. He knew it too.

"Ah, shit!" he said.

They jumped to their feet and rushed for the exit. The black sedan was still parked across the parking lot when they came out. Misato wasn't going to take any chances. She reached into her purse for her gun. As soon as she did, however, the sedan's engine roared to life and its headlights turned on.

"Miko, get down!" Nakajima yelled, pushing her behind the nearest car for cover. But when he stayed there with her, Misato realized he was not armed himself.

She cursed him and lined up her weapon.

The sedan rushed past them, tires squealing as it swung in a tight arc. She fired. The rounds hit. She heard them pinging as the jacketed slugs penetrated the thin metal of the car's body. One of its taillights shattered into a cloud of plastic. It was not enough. The sedan sped into the distance.

"Let's go," Misato spat, lowering her weapon and turning to Nakajima. She was already moving. "We'll take my car."

He nodded, helping Miko to her feet.

"Miko, stay here. You'll be safe with Sato."

"No." She refused to let go of him. "If you go, I go with you."

They didn't have time for this. Whoever it was in that car had been after them, and they were going to get away. Somehow they had been found out, and Misato had to know by whom and what they intended. There was only one way to be sure. But as she opened her car door, Sato grasped her arm and called for her to stop.

“What?” Misato demanded.

“Put that away before someone calls the police. This was a surveillance op,” Sato said, his voice edged with anger as his eyes locked on hers. “Think about it. If they had been after any of you, they would have shot you before you came in. Or when you came out. But the only one acting like a gun-toting maniac here is you.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Nakajima growled. He was pale, but the protective way he was holding on to Miko told Misato it wasn’t himself he was scared for. “Nobody knew we’d be here. Just the four of us.”

“They tapped your cell phones, or your laptops, or something,” Sato said. “Whatever it was, they wanted to keep an eye on you, but they weren’t after you.”

They all looked at each other.

Ironically, it was Miko who was quickest at voicing the most obvious question. “Then who were they after?”

Sato shrugged. “They might not even be after anyone. Intelligence gathering hardly ever is meant to lead to direct confrontation. It could be something as simple as wanting to know where you were.”

But he was wrong.

Misato knew the answer to Miko’s question. She could feel it in her heart. And suddenly she was more frightened than she had ever felt in her entire life. It was a sickening thing squirming inside of her, making her insides feel like acid. The knowledge that in trying to protect the children she had left them on their own.

“Major?” Nakajima said. “What is it?”

She ignored him, tossing her gun into the car and rummaging in her purse for her cell phone. Her hands were shaking slightly as she held the device to her ear.

The phone rang.

Please answer, she thought desperately. Please. Please.

Without realizing it, Misato sniffled. She turned away from the other three people and stared into the night. The phone kept ringing. She lifted a hand to cover her face. Slowly, she felt her heart sinking. Every mechanical ring seemed to destroy a little more of everything she loved.

Please . . .

“Um, hello?”

Misato’s heart swelled with joy at the sound of Shinji’s sleepy voice. “Shinji! Are you okay?”

“Uh? Y-Yeah. Why?”

“I think you might be in danger. I want you to get Asuka and leave the apartment. Turn off all the lights and lock the door behind you. Go to a different floor and find a place to hide. Take your phone with you. I’ll call you when I get there.”

“Misato, what’s going on?” Shinji said. His voice sounded scared now, an echo of Misato’s own distressed tone.

“Just do what I’m telling you!” She hadn’t meant to yell at him, and quickly added a soft, “Please.”

“Okay.”

“Be safe,” Misato said, wishing she could reach out and hold him. “Don’t be afraid. I’ll protect you and Asuka.”

“I know.”

That was a vote of confidence Misato was not sure she deserved. She hung up, put the phone away and opened the driver's side door.

"I have to go now," she told Sato, and barely had time to register his accenting nod before she had squeezed behind the steering wheel. She turned the key as the passenger side door swung open. She opened her mouth to protest, but Miko was already climbing into the back seat. Nakajima dropped onto the passenger seat, slamming the door shut behind him.

"We are coming with you," he said.
"If you are right and someone is going after the children, you are going to be needing help.
You got a weapon I can borrow?"

"How can you not have a gun?" Misato asked angrily.

"The last time I carried a gun, my own boss shot me with it," Nakajima said, looking away from her, a hint of embarrassment in his dark gaze.

"Right." Misato pointed behind her with a thumb.
"There's a shotgun behind the back seat," she said
and jammed the car into gear.





“Miko, stay in the car. I’m serious.” Nakajima climbed back between the two front seats, the twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun in his hands. As the blonde ducked out of sight, he jumped out of the parked Alpine and ran to join Misato at the base of the stairs. She had her gun ready, a fresh clip in, her heels off.

“Alright, let’s go,” Misato said.

Running up, they took the steps as fast as they could. Misato led the way. Nakajima followed closely behind her, but after the first couple of floors he was already short on breath. Misato’s legs were just warming up.

“Suck it up. I thought you were a soldier.”

“It’s been a long time since I left the military. And gym memberships are very expensive. Why couldn’t we have taken the elevator?”

“It’s a choke point,” Misato said.

“So is your front door,” Nakajima replied.

Misato ignored him. Fueled by adrenaline and fear, she picked up the pace, climbing the steps so quickly she wasn’t even seeing them anymore. When they finally got to her floor, she pressed herself against the nearest wall and scanned the darkened hallway. Everything seemed normal. She moved alongside the wall, keeping her back to it and holding her gun in front with both hands.

As they reached the door, they switched places. Nakajima moved in front and she stacked closely behind him. In the confined space of her apartment, his shotgun was a far deadlier weapon than her handgun.

“What does the inside look like?” he asked.

“Narrow hallway after the entrance. Goes into the kitchen. The bathroom entrance will be behind you—I’ll take care of that. The kitchen opens up into the living room. Main bedroom on the left. Hallway on the far right corner. Bedrooms on either side.”

Nakajima nodded, taking all that in very quickly.

“This is really going to be bad if they know we are coming.”

“You haven’t forgotten how to do this, right?” Misato said sternly. She fixed him with a glare. “Because if all you’re gonna do is get yourself killed, maybe I should take point.”

He shook his head and pumped the shotgun.

“No, it’s like riding a bicycle.”

Misato took a deep breath and looked at him carefully.

He was focused on the door, his dark, narrow eyes hard with determination. Like herself, he had people in his life he was willing to die for.

Seeing that he was ready, she passed her key card along to him. He swiped it on the lock. The door opened with a quiet hiss.

In the time it had taken to drive back several scenarios had come to Misato’s mind, some more extreme than others. She had eventually decided on the tactical approach for two reasons: even if there was nobody waiting on the other side of that door she had to be careful—getting killed wouldn’t help the children in any way—and if there was someone in there it would maximize the chances of making it out alive.

Misato tapped Nakajima on the right shoulder. He went in first, shotgun level and ready. Misato expected the dark to flare up with gunfire as soon as they crossed the threshold. She took a deep breath and followed Nakajima into blackness. And ...

Nothing.

“Entrance clear,” Nakajima called out, moving down the hall, sweeping the area with his shotgun. “Kitchen clear.”

As they moved around the kitchen table, Misato quickly checked the bathroom. “Bathroom clear.” Rather than hitting the lights, she placed a hand on the back of his left shoulder to help him navigate. “Watch out for cushions.”

They advanced into the living room. Nakajima edged to the left, aiming his gun in the opposite direction. Light filtered in from the balcony window.

“Living room clear.”

“Cover the hall,” Misato said, quickly stepping forward and checking her bedroom. “Master bedroom clear,” she called. They moved down to Shinji and Asuka’s rooms. Those were clear too. Finally, they checked the balcony.

“Clear,” Nakajima said. “Looks like that’s it. I’ll get the lights.”

Misato breathed a deep sigh of relief. “Thanks.” She returned her gun to its holster and retrieved her cell phone. As Nakajima began working on turning the lights on, she headed back outside and dialed. It barely had a chance to ring before Shinji answered it.

“Misato?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” Misato said, keeping her tone calm and reassuring. “It’s okay now. Where are you?”

The next voice she heard was much sharper and higher than Shinji’s, a girl’s voice, a very particular girl’s voice.

“Hey, give me that—” There was a loud noise, like something hitting the mouthpiece, followed by a struggle.

“H-Hold on, Asuka, let me—”

“No! You don’t know how to deal with her. Hand it over!”

Misato waited. Sure enough, when the struggle ended, it was Asuka who came back on the line. “What the hell is going on, Misato?” the redhead asked with a mix of anger, exasperation and a little fear.

Misato shook her head, but decided to hold off on a lecture. “Asuka, I’m outside the apartment. Where are you?”

“On the next floor. At the top of the stairs.”

“Stay there.” Misato hung up and ran. She climbed the first set of stairs at a trot, but once on the landing between floors she looked up and stopped. Shinji was sitting on the last step, holding Pen-Pen in his arms. Asuka stood at the top, Shinji’s cell phone in her hand. She looked angry. They were both still in their bed clothes—t-shirts and shorts—and barefoot.

“You have a lot to explain, Katsuragi!” Asuka pointed a finger at her, her already deep frown turning even deeper.

Shinji rose to his feet. He said nothing, but he seemed scared.

Misato finally let down her guard, and in doing so realized she was emotionally exhausted. Her adrenaline had kept her going, but there had been a wide empty hole in her chest that was only now starting to fill again thanks to the realization that they were safe. She climbed the remaining steps slowly, feeling her legs complain all the way, and, before she even knew she would do so, had drawn them both into a hug.

Shinji leaned into her silently, squeezing Pen-pen between them. Asuka groaned in protest but did not struggle to pull away. Misato held them even tighter.





Shinji watched Asuka but she seemed lost in her own thoughts.

It had taken all of fifteen minutes for Misato to explain what she believed was happening, and why she'd ordered them out of the apartment. He and Asuka—whose irritation at being taken out of bed under such conditions had mostly vanished—listened carefully. When their guardian stopped, a grim silence settled over them.

“You’re being paranoid,” Asuka said finally, blinking to focus her eyes on Misato. “You’re probably overreacting as usual.”

The three of them sat around the kitchen table. Their guests, a black-haired man named Nakajima and a blonde girl named Miko, stood next to each other with their backs leaning against the counter. Shinji was very uncomfortable about having strangers here, but given the seriousness of the situation, it seemed like a useless thing to complain about. Asuka hadn’t even deemed it worthwhile to acknowledge their presence, despite Miko constantly sending angry looks her way.

She made Shinji feel awkward. He saw a kind of very intense resentment in her face, like Asuka had done something to her. It was possible. Misato had said Miko was a NERV technician, and Asuka usually treated them like her own personal servants, sometimes worse.

“It’s not paranoia,” Misato explained. She looked tired, her eyes dull with weariness as she propped herself up with both elbows on the table.

“But it doesn’t make any sense,” Asuka said. “They need us.”

Shinji had to agree: why would the Japanese government attempt to cause them harm? They were on the same side.

They needed NERV to defeat the Angels or there wouldn't be anything to prevent Third Impact. And they needed the Evas and their pilots.

"You are a weapon that no one but NERV can control," Nakajima said. It was the first time Shinji heard him speak tonight. His voice was low, and it reminded him of Kaji. "And people, especially people with power, always fear what they can't control. Getting to you is the only way to get to the Eva."

Asuka scoffed, turning her head to Nakajima. "Who the hell asked for your opinion?"

"I'm—" he started but Misato interrupted him.

"He's still got a point."

"But, Misato . . ." Shinji curled up more tightly in his chair, looking down at his knees instead of her. "Why would they want to hurt NERV?"

Misato inched towards him. She stretched out her hand on the table as if to take his before realizing that there was nothing there. "They've never liked us," she said. "They only put up with us because we can defeat the Angels. Perhaps someone decided they'd rather control the Evas themselves."

"So what can we do?" Shinji suddenly felt helpless.

Misato's face filled with resigned sadness, and he knew she was going to say something that would cause them a great deal of pain. She signed heavily, shoulders sinking. "Here isn't safe for you anymore. We have to leave."

Asuka sprang up so forcefully it sent her chair clattering to the floor. "I am not going anywhere!"

She slammed her hands on the table and leaned over it, furiously glaring at Misato. "You don't even know what's going on and you want us to leave everything behind? I won't!"

Misato sighed again, but either from guilt or shame kept her eyes away.

"Asuka . . ."

"I won't leave Unit-02!"

"I know being an Eva pilot is very important to you," Misato said, her tone as sullen as her appearance. "But this is not about Unit-02, it's about you. It's about you being safe."

"You're just guessing, aren't you?" Asuka yelled, showing her teeth. "You don't really know anything! You think we're in danger! You think you know better! But you don't KNOW! What the hell kind of guardian are you?"

Swallowing that almost seemed to make Misato gag, but she said nothing. She just took it. Shinji wished Asuka would at least tell her why Unit-02 was so important. He thought that would make her refusal more reasonable.

Miko suddenly moved forward, an angry glare onto her face. "How dare you!" she yelled at Asuka as Nakajima grasped her arm to restrain her. "Major Katsuragi is trying to protect you because she cares about you! Can't you understand that? After what you did to Keiko I doubt you even deserve it!"

"Miko," Nakajima said soothingly. "Calm down."

Shinji was taken aback by the mention of the former brunette pilot. The subject of Keiko Nagara had almost become taboo in the apartment, a symbol of everything Asuka had felt was wrong with her and the worst kind of brutality she was capable of.

Furious, Asuka rounded on her. “You don’t know anything about me, so don’t speak to me like you do! I’ve never asked Misato to protect me, I can look after myself!” Her eyebrows drew together sharply. “And what does the crybaby have to do with it, anyway?”

“I know all I need to!” Miko retorted, red-faced. She now had Nakajima’s arms around her, holding her back. “You almost killed my little sister. You ruined her life. All she ever wanted was to be your friend and all you ever did was bully her!”

Oh no . . .

Shinji felt his eyes widening as the word “sister” hit him like a fist. His heart was suddenly very still in his chest. Keiko’s sister? She had a sister? And Asuka was . . .

It hit Asuka, too. He caught a glimpse of realization in her eyes—only for a split second, and he only noticed because he had grown so attuned to her. But it was enough that Asuka did not shout back. What could she say? For all that had changed, and whatever might have been wrong with Unit-02 at the time, it had been her who was in control when it attacked Keiko.

“But I guess that’s just what you do,” Miko said. “Even when someone is trying to protect you, you just throw it back in their face! What more do I need to know? What more proof do I need that you’re a horrible human being? You don’t deserve to have someone who cares . . . you don’t deserve anybody!”

Asuka clenched her fists. “You have no idea what I’ve been through!”

“You?” Miko stepped forward, actually dragging Nakajima along with her, looking like she was about to burst into tears.

“YOU? You little selfish brat!

Do you even regret what you did to her? Are you even sorry?”

Shinji cast an alarmed glance at Misato, who was shaking her head helplessly. He knew she didn't have enough left in her to fight with them both and bring things back under control. Miko glared unrestrained hatred toward Asuka, who glared back and refused to back down.

Then Asuka took a step. "I'll show you sorry!"

"Please stop," Shinji said softly. Somehow, he dredged up just enough courage to look at Asuka, his dark-blue eyes begging.

The grossly offended expression she threw his way almost broke his heart. "Don't you take her side! I swear to God, if you—"

"Please, Asuka." His voice was barely audible, and even he was aware that he sounded pathetic. "I just don't want you to fight."

The Asuka he'd once feared would have likely turned her rage on him, screaming at him that he should act like a man instead of a mouse, but the Asuka he loved moved back, dipping her head in a gesture of reluctant compliance.

Miko also backed off, though she continued to glare at Asuka. Nakajima loosened his grip around her waist. He didn't let go of her. Asuka picked up her chair from the floor and set it back at the table. She remained standing, visibly stiff and unhappy. Shinji wished he could put his arms around her as well.

"He's right," Misato finally intervened, looking reproachfully at Asuka, then at Miko. "You shouldn't be fighting at a time like this. Arguing over who hurt who and why isn't going to help anyone. We need to decide what to do—"

"I'm not leaving, either," Shinji interrupted.

All attention in the room turned to him, like he knew it would. He took a deep breath and once again mustered his courage.

“I’m not leaving,” Shinji repeated, more resolutely than before, his tone helping to convince him he’d actually said the words out loud. He tore his worried gaze from Asuka and focused on Misato.

His guardian rose slowly, tiredly, and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Shinji, if you stay, I don’t know how I could protect you,” she said kindly. “I don’t think you’d be safe.”

Shinji shook his head. “This is the first place that’s really felt like home. Leaving it would be like leaving a part of me behind, like losing something I don’t want to lose. I don’t want to run from the one place where I’ve felt even a little bit of happiness.”

As he spoke, he noticed Asuka twitch. Her fists unclenched and her face changed. The anger which had marred her features just a moment ago was gone and what remained was the pretty girl who’d taken his heart.

He turned his head. Their eyes locked together. Asuka’s lips parted, as if she might say something but was too surprised for words. He loved seeing her caught off guard like that. He loved the openness that her sharp features could display when he did or said something that she hadn’t expected; when she relaxed with him, when she slept.

Misato could try to convince him if she really wanted, and he knew that it would only be out of caring. She could tell him it was for the best and for their own safety, and she would probably be absolutely right. It wouldn’t make any difference, because the only thing that mattered to him was Asuka.

And Asuka wanted to stay.

Recognizing a lost cause when she saw one, Misato sighed and straightened. “I will have Section 2 tighten the perimeter around the apartment,” she said to no one in particular.

"I'll give orders that they are not to let you out of their sight, and they'll be authorized to use deadly force if your safety is at risk."

She stepped towards Asuka. "I really hope you're right and I'm being paranoid. But please be careful. If you notice anything strange at school or anywhere, please let Section 2 know. I don't want anything to happen to the two of you."

Even Asuka did not have the heart to argue with their guardian's concerned tone and just nodded, although Shinji suspected his asking her to stop fighting might have something to do with that. Misato seemed to consider it a small victory. He was just glad no one was yelling.

Then Misato glanced apologetically at Nakajima and Miko, who, like Asuka, had calmed down and appeared more tired than angry. If anything, the blonde girl looked slightly embarrassed.

"You two are gonna have to take the train," she told the couple. "I'm not going out again tonight. Sorry."

* * *

"It is not a very effective way to run my department," Musashi Kluge said coldly, pausing to light the cigarette held between his teeth and taking a drag. "This is not the sort of thing one simply puts together on a whim. Men and equipment have to be mustered and prepped. Then there is the matter of the actual operation. Everyone expects danger. They expect action, a chance to satiate their bloodlust. What they do not expect is to be called off for the flimsiest of reasons."

Doctor Akagi leaned back in her seat and crossed her legs. She appeared unconvinced by his speech.

“And, of course, it makes the leadership, that is me, seem indecisive.” Kluge exhaled a cloud of smoke. “A man in my position can not afford that.”

“A small price to pay for the souls of children,” Doctor Akagi said.

“We would not have killed them. If at all possible, I would have liked to meet them.” Kluge took one of the small glasses filled with ice and brownish liquor from the limousine’s bar and handed it to her. “As I explained, it would have been better. I am not prepared to make an arrangement for their lives at any further stage. To be honest, I think you have just condemned them to certain death.”

Doctor Akagi took the offered glass and drank. “We’ll see,” she said. “I have already guaranteed the Evangelion’s non-commitment as a defensive measure. As long as you follow the plan it will not be an issue. Arrangements can always be changed.”

Kluge took another glass and held it out to Maya, who wasted no time shaking her head. She had taken the far corner of the seat, leaning away from him and uselessly casting pleading glances towards Doctor Akagi.

“Maya hardly ever drinks,” Doctor Akagi said. “One of her few failings.”

“I see,” Kluge mused, his eyes fixed on Maya. “I know we started on the wrong foot, Lieutenant, but I assure you, Doctor Akagi has already seen to what I needed from you. You have nothing to fear from me.”

Maya recoiled, shaking her head again. She had her arms wrapped around herself protectively, but she felt utterly naked. She was cold, shivering. “You wanted to kill me,” she murmured.

And that was only the half of it. Being forced to betray her own principles at gunpoint had proved a hard blow to stomach from the start, but finding out Doctor Akagi, someone she idolized from the moment they met, had done it willingly was nothing short of crushing. Doctor Akagi didn't even seem concerned about the information she was giving up, much less what had happened to Maya. If anything, she looked strangely pleased.

Kluge returned the glass to the mini-bar.
 "I could see how you would think that. But it's an unfair oversimplification. I wanted you to help me. Nothing more. And I knew the threat of force would effectively guarantee your cooperation. I apologize for rattling you. Sometimes we must all do things we find unpleasant. For the greater good."

"I would never do something like that."
 Maya let her outrage ring in her voice.

"No?" Kluge seemed amused. "Sending fourteen-year-old children to fight overpowered abominations in bio-mechanical monsters that are just as likely to kill them doesn't strike you as unpleasant? In other parts of the world that would be called a war crime."

Maya felt sick with herself, both because of the accusatory way he said it, and because she knew it was the truth. What she had seen those children suffer—it was a war crime. And yet there really was no choice. The Evas could only be piloted by children, and only the Evas could defeat the Angels. "That's different."

"How so?"

"We protect a lot of people," Maya said. "We do what we have to."

"As do I." Kluge kept his eyes on her a minute longer, until Maya could not take it and shied back into her corner like a chastised girl afraid to incur further punishment.

With a sideways glance, she saw him turn back to Doctor Akagi.

“I really would prefer if you were to refrain from browbeating my staff,” the older woman said. “It’s bad for morale.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t have brought her.”

Doctor Akagi looked pityingly at Maya. “Would you want me to cut her loose? Knowing what she knows?” Her face hardened. “No, we’re better off with her right where she is. What worries me right now is you taking things into your own hands again. How am I supposed to trust you when you behave like an erratic psychopath?”

“Trust is a matter of instinct, I think,” Kluge said. “However, I understand your concern. As it relates to the children, while there are guarantees I can make, there are some that I can not. And there are some I will not. Removing them from the equation was a practical solution to what could turn into a very impractical problem. Once they do become a problem, when the situation devolves into kill or be killed, there might not be any more guarantees to make. If that should happen, we might have no choice but to put them down.”

Hearing him use that term, normally reserved for animals, filled Maya with hot anger. “Good luck,” she scoffed.

“It would take most of the SSDF to bring down a single Eva.”

Kluge smiled crookedly. “We are very aware of that, I assure you.”

“But you still need justification,” Doctor Akagi said, sipping from her drink and giving Maya a warning look.

“The software footprint is in my hands, thanks to you,” Kluge said, lifting his glass in mock salute. “The evidence has simply not been confirmed yet. It might take some time, but once it is ...”

Maya felt a shiver run down her spine. Doctor Akagi had explained after she surrendered the memory module she had used to download parts of Unit-02's programming.

Once the ISSDF computers had broken down the Emerald Tablet's software footprint and matched it to what the UN had recovered from Beijing, there would be no doubt as to NERV's complicity in the catastrophe.

Then there would be no way to uphold the Special Protection Order which had so far defended NERV from the circling vultures, nor would there be any way to question the Ministry's evidence. From what Maya understood, the Emerald Tablet was unique, its algorithmic structure more complex than just about any other on the planet, and as readily identifiable as human DNA.

That Doctor Akagi had been capable of using something like that with Unit-02—and Asuka—was among the most horrifying things Maya had ever seen someone do, and in her tenure as a NERV technician she had seen quite a lot.

And Maya had let it happen, too clueless to figure it out even as Asuka fought, suffered, and hurt others. She was as much a victim as Keiko, though perhaps in a different way. Many of NERV's actions could be justified on the basis of necessity, but there was only so far they should be willing to go. It was for all of them to balance necessity with responsibility.

But in using the Emerald Tablet—in allowing Asuka to be infected by it, Doctor Akagi had failed in her responsibility. And that was before the death toll from Beijing was added into the butcher's bill.

"Once it is," Doctor Akagi said,
"Gendo Ikari will know what betrayal feels like."

Kluge nodded. "Indeed."

Maya already knew, and it was heartbreaking.



Asuka finished clipping on her neural connectors as she stepped outside. The humid night air slapped against her skin as she walked. Not having had a chance to change, it was the second time tonight she left the apartment without dressing properly.

Suddenly awoken and rushed by Shinji, and still sore from their ... previous activity just a few hours earlier, she had barely managed to throw on her discarded clothes on the way to the door. She had no recollection of how or when Shinji had gotten back into his clothes. At least Misato had enough sense to call ahead—otherwise they would have been found sprawled naked on Shinji's bed without so much as a thin sheet to cover them.

But unlike the needless evacuation, this time Asuka had a purpose in leaving the apartment. She headed down the hall, hoping to catch up with Miko and the guy whose name she couldn't be bothered to remember. Her slippers made little noise in the night, almost muted by the din of the cicadas. She could have gone barefoot, as she had when Shinji had sleepily dragged her out of the apartment in his panic, but somehow she thought that would make her seem vulnerable.

The adults were waiting for the elevator when she found them, still in each other's secure embrace. Witnessing their affection angered her. She didn't know why.

"Excuse me," Asuka called, and though she tried to sound as pleasant as she could, her voice was still brimming with annoyance.

They both turned to her in surprise, but in Miko's case it was quickly overshadowed by resentment. "What do you want?"

Asuka, the proud Second Child, found that she could not meet Miko's eyes and dropped her gaze to the floor. It wasn't just guilt she felt eating away at her—guilt she could deal with. But as far as Keiko went, Asuka knew full well that, whatever the excuse, what she had done was wrong. She was not used to being wrong. She liked it even less.

"I . . ." Asuka started without knowing what she wanted to say. She felt suddenly idiotic and realized this was a very bad idea from a stupid little girl who just couldn't accept that she had made a mistake and move on. "I never meant to hurt Nagara," she blurted out at last. "I didn't like her, but I didn't mean . . . I didn't mean for what happened."

"Is that supposed to be an apology?" Miko said sharply.

Somehow, Asuka managed to bring up her gaze and fix it squarely on her. "No, it's not an apology," she said. "I don't think what I did to her can be forgiven."

Miko laughed disbelievingly, then shook her head. "She's already forgiven you."

Suddenly, in the warm night, Asuka felt a cold hand grip her heart. In her shock she let her emotions slip and her eyes widened, betraying her surprise. How could Keiko Nagara forgive her? How could anyone? If their roles had been reversed—if it were Asuka in the hospital, brutally injured while the one who did that to her went around finding love and living her life, she would have hated her forever.

"Why?" she managed to ask.

"I don't know." Miko shrugged. "All she said was she didn't want to live with that burden. I guess that's a good enough reason for her, but I don't agree."

Hating someone was definitely a burden. Asuka already knew that better than most people. It pushed down on your chest until you felt like you couldn't breathe, like your life simply stopped having meaning and your only purpose was to hate.

But her love for Shinji was changing that. She didn't understand how, just that it was, and she was glad for it. Once she had hated him, too.

Miko regarded her cautiously, her face set but no longer showing hostility. "Why did you do it?" she asked after a long silence.

Asuka resented her question. She didn't have to answer. She certainly didn't owe this woman an explanation when she could hardly explain her actions to herself. But she was someone who cared about Nagara, much more than Asuka ever had, and so she had an obligation to her as she did to her fellow pilot.

And there was also a more selfish reason. Because whatever Miko might think of her, Asuka had not hurt her sister just because she could. Not this time. She wanted her to know that.

"There was something wrong with me," Asuka said, trying not to remember what she had experienced in Unit-02 before seeing her Mama, nor the nightmares before that, nor thinking about killing herself that night. "I'm better now. That's not an excuse. But I ... I told her I would protect her. I should have protected her."

Miko listened to her, letting her finish. When she did, she slipped away from her man and moved closer until she stood right in front of Asuka, looking down on her. "You were going to protect her? I find that hard to believe."

"I don't care what you believe," Asuka said. She meant it, too.

"No, of course not," Miko said sarcastically. "Why would you? You're the Second Child—you don't care about anything or anyone."

Asuka clenched her fists. "That's not true."

Miko furrowed her brow, short wisps of blonde hair sticking to her forehead. "Isn't it?"

"You can believe whatever you want, I don't care. You don't mean anything to me so it's not like your opinion of me matters. You can even hate me if you want. I know a lot of people hate me. But even if you don't believe anything I say, I want you to tell Nagara that I didn't mean to hurt her."

Miko appeared to be taken aback. She reached up and grasped the front of her top. For the first time, her gaze turned away.

"I don't want to hate anyone." Something like regret began to appear on her features as she shook her head. "Why don't you talk to Keiko yourself?"

Just as soon as Asuka came up with an answer, she had to fight down another surge of self-loathing. She had been doing a lot of that lately.

Having accepted that she wanted to be with Shinji, and trying to be happy with him didn't mean all the negative emotions she had harbored for so long had gone away. Her conscious life was now a struggle between her ego and her desire. A weaker person would have gone insane, but she would do it as long as she had to, hoping it would get easier over time.

"I'm not brave enough," Asuka said finally, hating how pathetic she sounded yet knowing in her heart that she was just being honest.

"It's not about being brave," Miko said, her voice low and surprisingly warm. She sounded a lot like Misato when she spoke like that. "It's about taking responsibility for what you do. That's what being a grown-up is about."

But Asuka had seldom felt like such a little girl. Taking responsibility, for one thing, included facing the object of that responsibility, and she couldn't do that just yet.

Maybe one day, she decided. One day when she had managed to find that kind of courage. When her heart could accept forgiveness without having to surrender so much of her pride, and without feeling shame. Until then she would live with the knowledge of what she had done.

"Keiko always looked up to you," Miko said, "I think she would welcome you. Maybe you don't even have to say anything—maybe just being there is enough."

"And maybe it's not," Asuka replied harshly.

Miko's expression softened.

"You will never know unless you try, right?"

Asuka didn't want to talk about this anymore, already much too far outside her comfort zone for her liking. The warm night pressed in on her, forcing its heat and moisture against her skin the same way anger and disgust clamped on her insides. She took a step back in silence, doing her best to keep from glaring.

Miko nodded, opting not to push any further, and returned to the man's side. "Good night, Asuka," she said pleasantly as he put his arm around her.

The Second Child watched them take the elevator to the ground floor. As they disappeared behind the closing doors she sighed, and let the weight of anger roll off her slumping shoulders. She stood there for a moment, then lifted her head and strode back to the apartment.



*“It is because of laziness and cowardice that
it is so easy for others to usurp the role of guardians.
It is so comfortable to be a minor!”*

—Immanuel Kant

Genocide 0:14 / Experience

Warm morning light stroked her skin with soft but increasing intensity. Rei opened her eyes as the last vestiges of dreamless sleep faded and took a slow breath.

The air was loaded with the familiar smells of her apartment, the old tiles, used sheets, unwashed dishes and utensils. Somewhere outside she could hear the bustle of construction. After a moment, she finally rose, brushing back messy locks of blue hair from her forehead, and shuffled her way to the bathroom, completely unbothered by her nakedness.

Rei had never cared about clothing. She had never seen the use or purpose in such an imposition. Even as she grew more accustomed to being around others, it seemed vain and artificial. Nature did not demand that any of its creatures dress; only humans attempted to hide themselves from each other this way.

This way ... and many more.

The shower was hot, one of the few comforts still available in this housing block. Rei enjoyed the feeling of countless rivulets streaming down her body, bouncing off her slender shapes and washing away the night. Her hands found the soap and moved almost on their own,

her fingers slippery. It was, however, not fit to last. By the time she was finished, the water had gone cold.

Removing a yellowing towel from a nearby rack, Rei threw it over her head and around her shoulders and began drying her face, the motions mechanical and efficient. She did not wish to be late.

Commander Ikari had already told her school was no longer important for her development, but she resolved to continue attending even without his permission if necessary. Like visiting Keiko, it was among the few decisions she had made on her own, a physical representation of her free will. When asked, Keiko had stated an education was important because it opened doors in your future. Rei had not confessed the truth about herself. She could not have known.

With her hair dry and out of the way she finally saw her eyes, unnatural red orbs peering out from a delicate, emotionless face. She ran the towel over her arms, chest, legs, and narrow waist, carefully avoiding more sensitive places she had learned could cause different responses than what she was used to.

As she left the bathroom and headed back to her bed, Rei tossed the towel into the box which served to hold her laundry. Her school uniform hung nearby on a rack, the familiar blue jumper and white blouse showing clear signs on wear and tear. While the jumper was one of only two she owned, the blouses could be purchased in sets of five, one for every day of the week. Her predecessor had opted for this rather than buying individual ones. Likewise, Rei Ayanami, the second one, had bought panties in sets of five, keeping them neatly arranged in a drawer like some hidden treasure.

Since they were the same size, Rei never had to worry about going shopping, using what was left to her by the girl who lived her life before. Lately, however, she had seen a white dress in a shop window that attracted her strangely.

Rei dressed as efficiently as she showered, every movement practiced countless times. She slipped into her shoes on the way out, her book bag already clasped in her hand.

The morning sun shone brightly on the deserted blockhouse buildings. This part of the city was largely abandoned and populated only by low-income tenants who could afford nothing better. The din of construction was long silent; with fewer and fewer people moving in there was little use for additional housing. In fact, all of Tokyo-3 seemed to be dying a slow death, something the second Rei had helped bring about by her destruction of most of the downtown district.

She had only walked a few yards when she noticed a kind of tap at the back of her mind. The sensation was similar to fingers reaching through the base of her spine, upwards into certain inaccessible parts of her brain. She looked behind her and saw a large black sedan with tinted windows parked on the opposite side of the street.

Ever since a suspected kidnap attempt a few weeks back Major Katsuragi had tightened Section 2's protective perimeter. The Second Child had made quite a spectacle when they were told that Section 2 would now keep them under surveillance around the clock. Rei thought it a valid precaution if the Major was indeed worried about their safety. In his usual shy manner, the Third Child had agreed, earning him a tongue-lashing from the Second.

"Excuse me."

Rei heard the words before they were spoken and turned her head to find the person speaking them as she finished. A black-haired woman stood in front of her, dressed in NERV's standard cream-colored uniform and holding a map. She had green eyes and a round face. Her features were soft, distinctly western, and twisted in confusion.

“Perhaps you could help me,” the woman said, gesturing with her map. “I just transferred from Matsushiro. I was assigned an apartment on Block A, Apartment 303. Problem is I don’t know where that is.”

Immediately Rei knew there was something wrong about this woman—something in the back of her mind told her the voice didn’t sound right despite having never heard it before. She kept her red eyes frozen on the woman, as if trying to see through her, not saying anything.

The woman drew back.

“Uh, I didn’t mean to bother you. Sorry if I—”

“Is there a problem?” The Section 2 agents sitting in the car had stepped out and were now walking towards Rei and the woman.

The woman turned her attention from Rei to the agents.

“Yeah,” she said, growing nervous. “I’m lost.”

“You work for NERV?” The agent on the right asked, taking in her appearance from behind his sunglasses. His voice was low and gruff, the tone of people who seldom had a lot to say.

“Yes.” The woman hastily produced an ID card out of her purse and showed it to the agents. “My name’s Fuunoka.”

“That’s a weird name for a girl,” the agent on the left snickered as his partner examined the identification.

“Tell my parents that.”

“Where are you headed?” the other agent asked, returning the ID card after apparently becoming convinced it was genuine.

She showed him her map. “Block A, Apartment 303.”

The agent looked at the map, then down the street at a large building a hundred yards away then back at the map.

He pointed in the direction of the building though he seemed uncertain. "It's over there, I believe."

"Thanks," the woman said, her expression turning to pleasant gratitude as she folded her map. "You guys must be from Section 2. You know, I've heard some real horror stories about you. It's nice to see you are not all jerks." She extended a hand and they both shook it. "Hey, are you guys busy? I have some stuff to move and, well, I'm not big and strong like you are."

Regardless of how big and strong they might be, those words made them seem suddenly awkward. "Um," the agent on the left muttered, "We really shouldn't. We are on duty."

"Oh, come on. Who's even going to notice?" The woman closed her eyes and held her hands out together in a pleading gesture. "Please! It's a lot of stuff."

The men exchanged a look. The one on the left nodded first. "Okay, but we can't take too long."

"Great!" The woman beamed so broadly even Rei had to admit there was a certain degree of charm to it. "Thanks a lot. By the way, you can call me Fuuka." She practically bounced as she slipped each arm through one of theirs and turned back to Rei. "Well, I guess I better start moving. I'll see you around, neighbor."

Rei said nothing, and the woman didn't wait for a reply. When she left she took both Section 2 agents with her, their stony looks more relaxed now than they had been just a few short minutes before.

Once, not so long ago, Rei would have been perplexed. But not anymore. The men were attracted to her, probably more particularly to her shapely legs. They didn't know what she did—what she could feel in that smile and in those eyes.

That this woman was a liar.





Asuka sighed at the group of girls gathered together near the front of the classroom, then brought her sullen blue gaze back to the open bento in her lap. It was not the first time she did this, and Shinji couldn't take the guilt anymore.

"I don't mind if you want to go have lunch with them," he said. "Really."

Sitting atop his desk, her toes not quite reaching the floor, Asuka seemed to seriously consider it. Shinji sat on his chair below her, holding up his own bento as he picked his food out of it with chopsticks. Hikari had pulled up a chair to their right while Kensuke was to their left, completing a tight yet hopelessly awkward little group. A much larger group had gathered around Miho, including most of the girls who would normally surround Asuka during lunchtime.

"They're just stupid little girls," Asuka said bitterly after a moment. "I don't care what they think. It's a waste of my time."

Shinji was not convinced. He would expect such an answer from her, but he also knew her well enough to realize that what she said didn't always match how she felt. He also knew better than to get into an argument with her over something like this.

As Shinji returned to his bento, the hint of blue on his peripheral vision caught his glance. Rei was still sitting at her usual place next to the window. She was not eating, just staring blankly at the scenery outside and being alone. It always made Shinji feel bad for her. They hadn't talked much lately, and he was sure Asuka would be—

“I saw that!”

“Sorry,” Shinji apologized instinctively, his eyes low to avoid Asuka’s angry glare.

“I have to make sacrifices to be with you.” Asuka set her bento aside and leaned forward, her eyebrows drawn sharply together. “The least you can do is pay attention to me!”

“I know. I am. But . . .” Shinji hesitated. Despite his relationship with Asuka having progressed to the point where he felt he could talk to her about almost anything, it was still sometimes difficult. Especially when it came to Rei. “I mean, you know how it feels to be alone, don’t you? More than anyone, I think. And . . . I know, too. So it bothers me when I see Rei alone.”

“And you think that entitles you to stare at her?”

“No,” Shinji said. “And I wasn’t.”

Whether she really believed that, he couldn’t tell—Asuka was not usually mean for the sake of just being mean, but her nature was to be sharp and confrontational like a rowdy pufferfish. She lashed out almost on instinct. It was why it’d been so hard for them to communicate in the first place. But he knew now it also reflected her insecurities. How she really felt about the things which were left unsaid, what she feared.

And with him and Rei . . . well, the reason Asuka might feel threatened was obvious even to him. They had a history, and she didn’t know the truth. Shinji had told her as much as he dared, but not everything. Rei’s deepest secret was something only Rei could share.

“This is so typical of you,” Asuka murmured.

“You are never glad for what you have.

You don't appreciate anything—you used to do the same with Eva when I couldn't pilot. You only think about what you don't have."

"I said I was sorry, okay?" Shinji let his shoulders sag and dropped his head even further. "I just want to have a nice lunch. No fighting."

Besides him, Hikari looked on disapprovingly, and for a moment Shinji thought she might step in and make things worse. He was glad when she continued to eat from her bento, as if keeping her mouth full was the only way to hold herself back. He could feel the pitying look from some of the other girls as well. At least he didn't have to worry about Kensuke—Asuka's threat to shove his camera down his throat if he ever came between her and Shinji was enough of a deterrent.

"Fine," Asuka growled and jumped to her feet. To Shinji's horror, she marched straight towards Rei.

"H-hey, what are you ..."

He almost went after her, but by time he made up his mind Asuka had already planted herself in front of Rei's desk, hands firmly set on her hips. Caught between surprise and helplessness, he froze before the face of impending disaster and stared. Hikari was also staring, mouth half open as the other students began to notice. Heads turned. The chatter of gossip ebbed to a stop.

Rei ignored Asuka as someone might ignore a preening cat demanding attention, her gaze fixed somewhere beyond the window. Then Asuka snapped.

"The idiot would be very happy if you joined us for lunch."

Shinji's jaw fell.

“Who is the idiot?” Rei asked without looking up.

“Him!” Asuka shoved a finger in his direction. “The idiot!”

Rei returned Asuka’s hostility with calmness, but her ruby eyes were slightly wider than normal as they moved to meet blazing blue ones. “I do not have anything to eat,” she said as softly as ever. “I am sorry.”

“What the hell kinda lame excuse is that?” Asuka’s outraged voice rose to a new, more insistent pitch. The one she used only when very annoyed. “Don’t you know it’s rude to decline when someone asks you to join them?”

“No.” Rei shook her head.

“Well, it is. It makes you seem cold and anti-social, or maybe that you just think you are better than everyone else. But you can’t fool us.” Asuka gave Shinji a snide glance. “Why do you want to be alone, anyway? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I am not alone.”

Asuka snorted derisively. “Now you are just kidding yourself. Frankly, I don’t care if you want to build a nice little wall around your desk and never come out. But it upsets the idiot. I’ll put up with you as long as it keeps him from moping all through lunch.”

Rei blinked, apparently surprised. “You mean Shinji—”

“Of course I mean Shinji!” Asuka repeatedly stabbed her finger rather violently at Shinji, who shrank back in his chair until it felt several sizes too big. “Are you stupid? Can’t you see you are making him miserable?”

“I ... am?” Rei said in a puzzled tone.

“Yes. Look!” Asuka insisted. “Also, since when do you call him by his first name? What’s up with that?”

“He asked me to,” Rei said, glancing over at Shinji.
“Should I join you?”

All the Third Child could do was bow his head into the flimsiest of nods. How else was he supposed to answer? It wasn’t like he could just claim Asuka was wrong and Rei wasn’t welcome. She was. Just maybe not quite so loudly.

When Rei started rising out of her chair, it became clear Asuka had succeeded in including her in their group. As she came back with the blue-haired girl in tow, Asuka flashed a sharp grin of victory. Then she leaned in and whispered in his ear.

“See? Some dolls do have a string you can pull.”

Shinji turned his head away. “Please, don’t call her that.”

“Never satisfied, are you?” Asuka huffed, her tone only half sarcastic. She hopped back onto his desk and retook her bento, looking a bit more smug than she had been before as she folded her slender legs beneath her.

Kensuke found Rei a chair and she sat with her hands in her lap between him and Hikari. Looking for a good excuse to avoid Asuka’s eyes, Shinji began searching through his bento.
“Rei, I’ve got some rice balls, if you get a napkin—”

“We’re not sharing so don’t get any ideas,” Asuka said flatly.
“It’s her fault she doesn’t have anything to eat anyway.”

Regardless, Hikari quickly volunteered some of her own rice balls. Her cooking was not bad; Shinji was sure Rei would like them.

“Thank you,” Rei said,
her voice softer than Shinji could ever recall.

“Don’t mention it, Ayanami,” Hikari said. “Next time bring something to eat, or plan to buy something in the cafeteria. It’s not very healthy to go without eating all day.”

Rei nodded.

“I’ll make you something next time if you want,” Shinji started, but Asuka’s glare told him he would shut up if he knew what was good for him. He returned his attention to his food.

They ate quietly for a while, and as they did it began to dawn on Shinji that Asuka, in her own confrontational way, had actually done something nice for him. She had invited someone she, at best, didn’t like, to come share a meal with them. He had never believed Asuka to be as selfish as she wanted others to think—okay, he had but that was a long time ago and only because he didn’t understand—but this felt suddenly like quite a step for her.

When he finally managed to sneak a glance towards Rei, he saw a gleam of what he could only describe as gratitude. He even thought he saw Rei smile. In any case, he smiled back. Asuka was too busy wolfing down her bento to notice or she would have certainly gone off on him. It felt strange to have the two of them so close together, and yet he wished they could do it more.

Rei was the first to finish, which wasn’t surprising given how little food she had. She wiped her hands on her skirt, but instead of looking at Hikari, who had shared her food with her, she turned to Asuka.

“Thank you.”

“Is that all you can say now?” Asuka snapped.

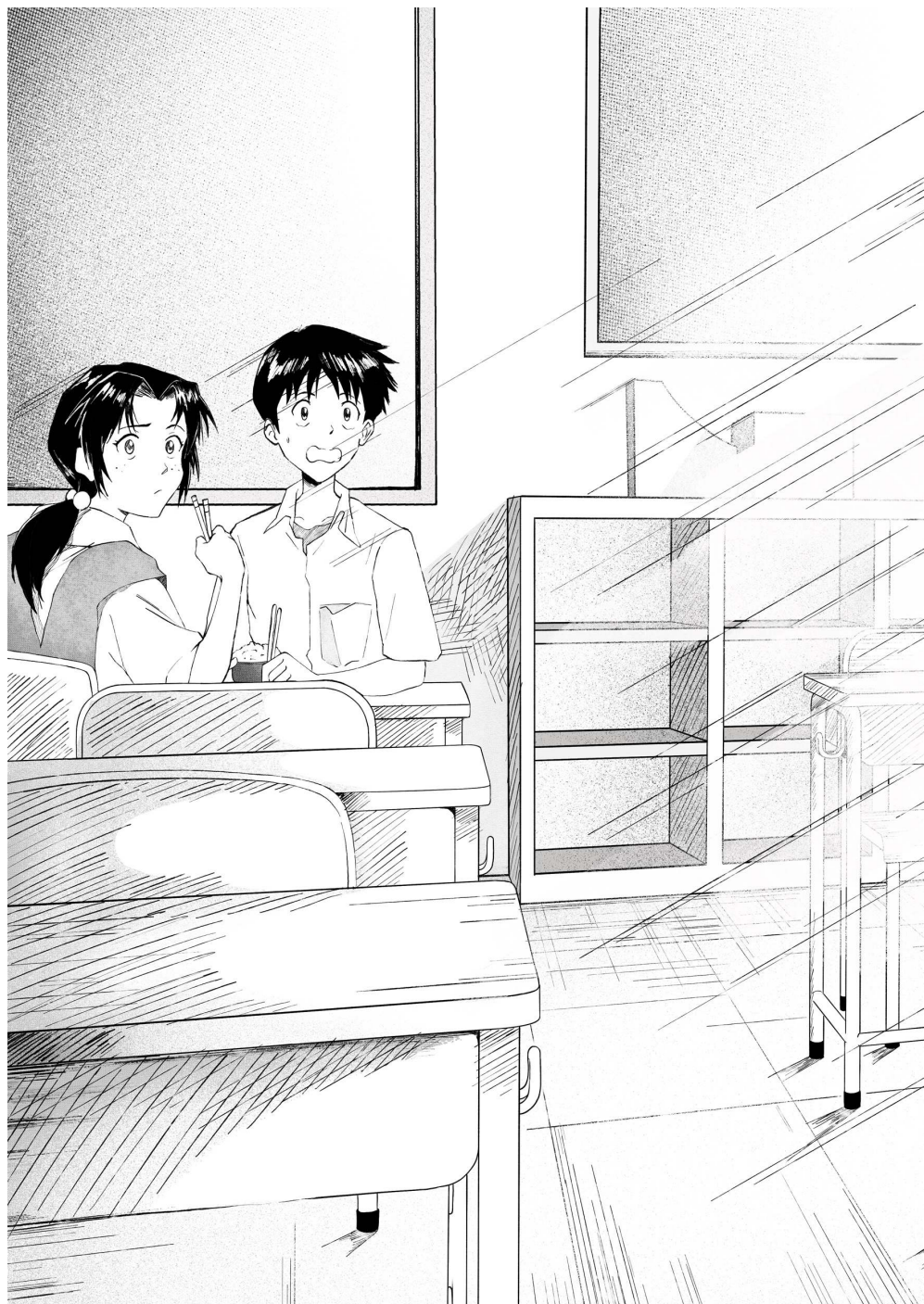
Shinji caught her eyes before she could utter the insults he knew had to be coming. Asuka glared in response, her scowl so deep it nearly reached the bridge of her nose. He pleaded silently with her, asking her how she would feel if others excluded her the way Rei had been excluded; asking her to remember what it felt like to be alone. And perhaps because she did, Asuka dipped her head and turned away.

The guilt returned. Shinji wished he could tell her she didn't have to do anything like this to make him happy if it was not what she wanted. But he didn't know how she'd react, and words like those felt private.

Feeling like he should both thank her and make it up to her, Shinji reached out his hand and placed it very gently on her knee. Asuka lifted her head, just enough to let him see her eyes through her long, scattered bangs. They shimmered prettily despite the anger.

He began to open his mouth, but the expression on his face made his intention perfectly clear and Asuka was quicker, as always.

"If you say anything stupid," she barked, "I'll punch you!"







“Ouch!”

Shinji rubbed his arm where Asuka had punched him. He was only surprised it had taken her so long, but after being angry with him since lunch it was just a matter of time.

“Idiot!” Asuka lunged, her eyes round and angry. Her hand shot downwards, the same one she’d used to punch him, and found its way to his before closing into a tight grip. She pressed herself against him, her head turned away. “What do you think is gonna happen when you say things like that? It’s like you’re tempting fate or something.”

Instinctively, Shinji squeezed her hand back, feeling her slender fingers worm their way around his until they were locked together. With their arms now at their sides and hands between their bodies, it was unlikely that anyone on the crowded train platform could notice the intimate gesture.

“I didn’t mean—Unit-01 has never had activation problems,” Shinji said. “And if you are right, it’s my mother inside of it. There wouldn’t be anything to worry about.”

“Maybe,” Asuka replied, shuffling her feet to give herself a little more room. The salaryman next to her seemed none too pleased to find himself so close to a fidgety teenager. “She could have issues. In fact, I guarantee you she has issues. Remember that one time she tried to EAT an Angel?”

He did, and the memory still gave him nightmares. Unit-01 had gone berserk before, including during his first time piloting it,

but this was the most vicious and violent episode. And while it might be unique in its brutality, it certainly wasn't in its strangeness.

Time and again he had felt and seen things inside Unit-01 that he couldn't explain. Like old dreams or remnants of a life he no longer had. During the last battle, he even thought he'd heard a familiar voice begging him to let it cut loose. Was that his mother? Would she be so angry and desperate to protect him?

It was possible, he supposed. There was so much about Eva that neither one of them understood. Or maybe they just missed their mothers so much they were seeing and hearing and feeling things because they wanted to be with them again. Perhaps it was just another sign of how broken they were.

Either way, there was nothing to fear from Unit-01.

"I'm just saying you shouldn't say things like that," Asuka added, apparently mistaking his silence for apprehension. "Not that anything will go wrong."

"I guess someone will let you know."

Asuka turned, but he flinched away before she could punch him again. "Of course someone will let me know!" she said in a high-pitched tone that was part anger and part distress. "I'm the one who'll have to find a way to take it down."

That much was true, Shinji realized, and beneath the show of anger he saw what she really felt.

Despite being younger than him by almost six months, Asuka was actually an inch taller. Not really enough to make him look up to her but enough to remind him of the high standard she represented in his life. One which he struggled to maintain even with his best efforts.

There was, however, no denying the nature of the connection that now existed between them. Both he and Asuka recognized it.

And the fact that Asuka was so worried—in her unique way, which happened to involve hitting him with her hands and feet—assured him of how much he had come to mean to her; of how high of a standard he represented himself. Shinji was sure, as sure as he had ever been of anything, that Unit-01 would never harm him, but he appreciated Asuka's willingness to show her concern and share it with him.

The train arrived to the sound of screeching brakes. It was still slowing down as it crossed the terminal, windows passing by in a blur in front of Shinji and Asuka. When it finally stopped, the door slid open and the crowd began to work its way inside.

"Go on," Shinji told her. "I'll see you tonight after the test."

Asuka gave him a parting glance as she let go of his hand, her slender fingers brushing his one final time.

"Tonight," she repeated with a firm nod, now having to turn herself sideways as the crowd bumped her around and pushed her towards the open door. "Don't be late or I'll start without you!"

"I'll do my best," Shinji said.

Asuka's lips moved in reply, but her words were lost in the noise of the crowd. As the train doors closed, she pressed a hand against the glass. Rather than waving goodbye, which wasn't really her style, she offered him a grin and a tilt of her head calculated to seem playful.

He would definitely see her tonight, and knowing her, she would probably want to make up for their reluctant separation.

Shinji grasped the strap of his bag across his chest, over his heart, already quickening in anticipation of their bared bodies mingling together in the heat of his room. Doing “that” with her was oddly like fighting her—more an act of aggression than cute and cuddly. She was always in charge, always on top and usually very loud. There was almost no kissing, no overt displays of affection beyond maybe holding hands. Until they were done.

Only then, when they were spent and satisfied, did he get to see a completely different side of her. The softer side. Without the angry frowns and sharp words.

He smiled shyly at her, and her grin broadened in return. One of those rare genuine smiles she reserved for a chosen few. A brief reminder that no matter how obnoxious Asuka acted in public, or how nasty she could be to him and others, or even how downcast she might seem at times, she was happier than she had been since moving to Tokyo-3. Because of him.

The crowd had thinned considerably by the time the train headed back out, carrying Asuka with it. Shinji suspected the only reason Misato still allowed them to use the public transit system instead of having Section 2 drive them everywhere was the crowd—too many possible witnesses for anyone to try anything.

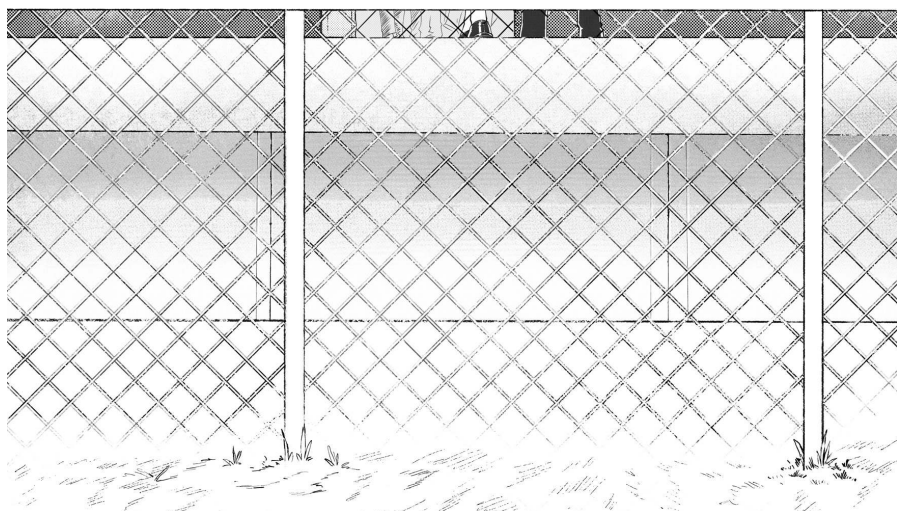
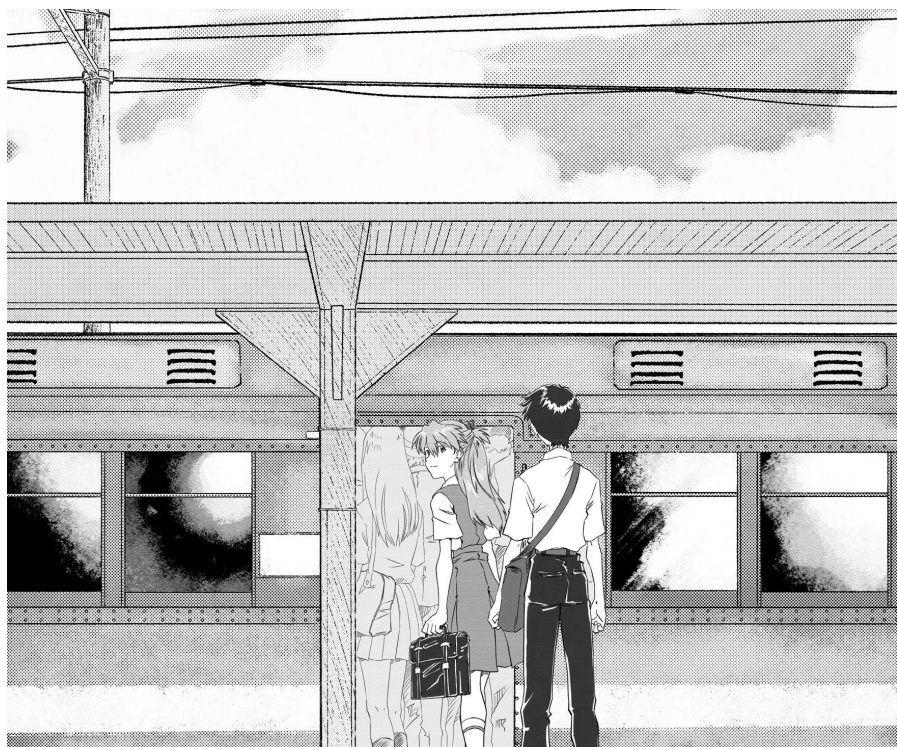
Letting them use the train was also Misato’s concession to the fact that they were trying to lead normal lives as best they could. Section 2 escorted them from one point to another like before, but now skulked outside their school and home more visibly, letting any would-be attackers know they were there. Visible deterrence, his guardian had called it.

Sure enough, when Shinji looked past the crowd he saw a man in a suit and tie standing at the edge of the platform.

He had probably seen most of his interaction with Asuka. They might even have microphones on them to listen in on their conversation. He ignored what advantage they could gain from that, but teen romance was always good gossip material.

Suddenly feeling very embarrassed, Shinji glanced at his watch to hide his blush from the watching agent.

Fifteen minutes and he'd be on his own train headed for Central Dogma. Once inside the installation's expansive surveillance network, Section 2 would back off. He would then be recorded instead of merely watched.





If there was one thing in his life Shinji could count on it was the punctuality of the Tokyo-3 public transit system. He boarded the next train right on time, found himself a seat near the back and pulled out his S-DAT from his bag.

Beethoven rose out of nothingness. Ever since Kaworu died this was the only thing he listened to; he didn't know why. Beethoven seemed to give meaning to the long stretches of his life when nothing happened—when there was no Eva to pilot, no one to make him company.

He listened to Beethoven all the way down into Central Dogma. Until, finally standing in front of his locker, he removed his earbuds, along with the rest of his clothing. Folding his uniform into a neat square, he placed it into the locker on top of his shoes, catching a glimpse of himself on the small mirror affixed to the back.

For no reason he thought of his mother again. What would she think if she could see him now? Would she approve of the man he was growing into, of the choices he'd made? Was he what she expected? If he could just know that she was happy with him ...

"I miss you," he murmured to nobody and shut the locker.

Shinji retrieved his folded plugsuit from the vacuum-sealed plastic bag it came wrapped in and began pulling it up his body. The blue-white suit had become a symbol of some of the worst moments of his life, but it felt like armor against new tragedies.

With the press of a button,
the suit clamped around him so forcefully it made him gasp.

He flexed his gloved hands and ran his fingers along his collar to check that it was properly aligned. The suit was a custom fit, sticking to him like a second skin. It had taken some getting used to at first, considering it revealed every bump and curve of his body, but by now it was as natural as wearing his school uniform.

He had a final look at himself in the mirror and made his way to the exit, stretching his arms as he went and continuing to feel the suit slowly mold itself into all the available spaces. Even the more personal ones.

Unit-01 was already in place when he entered the holding cage with the entry-plug waiting for him. Gantries and catwalks sprawled around it for access like a small metallic labyrinth. And on one of the gantries, Shinji saw the imposing figure of the man he could no longer bring himself to call Father.

Gendo Ikari fixed him with his hard gaze. Shinji stopped and quickly looked down at his own feet, refusing to meet his eyes. Footsteps rang loudly on the metal flooring, coming closer and closer, until he could tell, without looking, that his father was standing right in front of him.

“You have done well,” a deep, emotionless voice said.
“Better than I expected.”

Then a heavy hand descended onto his shoulder.

Shinji felt his resolve to avoid his father quickly collapse. His chest constricted and every breath became an effort. He couldn't look up, couldn't face him. Too many times he had found himself being forced to do things against his will, to hurt people he wanted desperately to protect, to hate everything about his life. And all because this man had made him.

He had broken Shinji, as completely as Asuka was broken by the loss of her mother. But the Third Child had dealt with it differently. Rather than excel, he wanted to disappear; rather than survive and make others notice, he wanted to simply stop being.

And yet, despite everything Gendo had done to him, those few words of approval suddenly meant the world. Shinji squeezed his eyes shut.

“F-Father . . .”

Gendo removed his hand. “But I still expect much from you.”

As he moved past him, Shinji mustered the courage to lift his gaze, turning slightly but trying to avoid eye contact. He watched his father retreat, his steps heavy as if he carried a great weight within his body.

“F-Father?” Shinji’s voice trembled audibly as he called out. He clenched his gloved hands into fists to keep the rest of him from trembling as well. It didn’t quite work, but it also didn’t really matter either. Too much had been said about his mother lately. He had to know.

Gendo stopped. He didn’t turn. “Yes?”

“May I ask you something about Mother?”

“You may.”

Shinji swallowed hard. “She . . . how did she die?”

Gendo considered his request for a moment, and his silence predictably made Shinji feel awkward. Finally, his father turned and did the last thing Shinji would have expected. He answered.

“It is not important how she died,” Gendo said sternly. “What matters is why. She died because she loved you too much to let you live in such a miserable world.”

Shinji could hear the accusation and bitterness in his father’s voice, and also something not too different from what he had heard in Asuka’s many times over the last few months. Ironically, it was only through those painful experiences that he’d learned to identify the emotion. Hurt. Hidden, unwanted, but very much present.

“B-Because of me?” he said.

“Yes.”

Shinji took a breath. He felt like his heart had come to a stop. In a moment of grief, he realized he had been wrong about his father all these years. Incredibly wrong. He had thought his father had never cared because he never showed otherwise. He never spoke of his mother, kept no pictures and seemed as if he would rather forget that she ever existed. But he still cared, and because he did, her memory, her loss hurt him.

And he blamed Shinji for it. That was why he treated his own son like a stranger, never with kind words or affection. That was why he had abandoned him to relatives when he was little and didn’t bother with him until he needed him to pilot Eva.

His father blamed him.

There was only one thing Shinji could think of saying as he felt tears beginning to fill his pale blue eyes. “I . . . I am sorry.”

“In the end, doing what she did was her decision,” Gendo said, unmoved by his son’s display of emotion. “You should not hold yourself accountable for that.”

“But you do,” Shinji whimpered, wiping the back of his gloved hands over his face, rubbing off his tears with pathetic desperation, all he could do to keep from crying.

“You . . . you blame me, don’t you?”

“I am not you.”

The lump in Shinji’s throat was too big to swallow. He choked. “B-but—”

“There is only one person in this world you must learn to live with. And it is not me or anyone else. There is only one person whose happiness should matter to you,” Gendo paused, tilting his head towards Unit-01 as it loomed over them. “Your mother believed that it was possible to find happiness in sharing yourself with others, and that we can give of ourselves to safeguard the future of those we love. But I know she was wrong.”

Shinji was quiet, rubbing his eyes as he fought to keep more tears at bay. His father didn’t seem to care.

“You should understand this better than most people,” Gendo said. “Human beings cannot overcome loss as long as they live. All we can do is to bury it deep in our hearts. But never deep enough.”

Shinji thought about that, and about what Asuka said regarding them never losing their mothers, and how when she made him talk about her he had felt so dejected until she took his hand and shared her own pain with him. And then he realized that even though he badly missed her, he was also glad he could remember her. Her memory remained strong in him because he loved her, and the day he stopped missing her was the day he stopped loving her.

And so he refused to accept his father’s truth.

“I . . . I don’t believe that,” Shinji raised his head. “I won’t forget about Mother. I miss her, and it hurts, but I won’t forget.”

Gendo’s hard, dark eyes met him, his features carved out of stone, completely devoid of any emotion, good or bad.

Shinji stood his ground, even though he knew he must have sounded childish and naive. He refused to look away. And if his father admonished him for it, he would rather live missing his mother than forget her because it hurt too much. His father had forgotten; to Shinji that was yet another sin.

To his surprise, Gendo nodded.
“Then you are a stronger man than I.”
He turned his back and began walking away slowly,
hands in his pockets.

Shinji watched his father go in silence, staring at him with a newfound sense of determination. Only when he heard Maya’s voice over the loudspeaker bidding him to climb on board Unit-01 did he snap out of it and trudged up the steps to the access hatch.

“Begin linkage sequence,” Maya’s voice called out.

Shinji curled into a tight ball and lay his head behind his knees as a hundred thoughts and emotions tugged insistently at him. So many that he couldn’t tell what exactly he was feeling. All around him Unit-01’s entry-plug slowly became a little warmer and more welcoming than usual, as if she knew to offer the comfort he needed.

And perhaps she did. Perhaps she always had.
From that very first time when she saved his life until now. Through every battle and every loss, and even the most difficult of victories. Like any mother should.







Misato hung up, flipped her cell phone closed, and placed it on the table. Across from her, his hand around a cup of coffee, Nakajima looked interested.

“How did it go?”

“It was fine.” Misato leaned back and crossed her legs, shifting her posture on the chair slightly to the side.

Nakajima seemed unconvinced.

“Not really a comforting answer.”

Misato sighed, moving forward to place her elbows on the table. “Shinji’s alright. That’s all I can ask at this point. He’s in the apartment with Asuka.” She paused, bringing her mind back to their conversation before she had thought to call Shinji to make sure he had gotten home safely. “Anyway, what do you think?”

“I don’t think you can rule it out,” Nakajima said. “The fact of the matter is that we don’t have enough information. We know, obviously, that the Americans are not known for doing things without proper planning. You saw them when they were unloading Unit-08—they are obsessed with details.”

Misato had made that very same observation to herself when she had gone to New Yokosuka to receive NERV’s latest Eva unit, but she would rather not think about that, nor what happened to its pilot. In her mind, she should have done more to protect Keiko, even if it might have meant putting Shinji at risk. He, at the very least, would have been able to defend himself. Keiko had been little more than cannon fodder.

And if she had known how hard of a time Asuka was having, she might have prevented her from going out there.

Of course, that was before she knew about the Tablet and what it did. After that Misato was not sure she could trust in the decisions of her superiors, and her sense of personal obligation to the children had long outweighed her sense of duty.

“You also have to wonder about their interest in the pilots,” Nakajima said. “A weapon—and I’m sorry to speak of them that way but I’m being realistic—is useless without anyone who knows how to use it.”

Inside Misato the old urge to resent him struggled against the knowledge that he, too, cared for one of the children.

“Ever since the Jet Alone fiasco, I haven’t heard of any other sort of technology to replace the Eva units, but that would be the only thing you would find Eva pilots useful for,” Misato said. “Unless they really mean to take down the UN.”

Nakajima shook his head. “I doubt even the Americans have that much influence. We don’t live in a unipolar world anymore. There are no more superpowers.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter, does it? Asuka won’t go anywhere so there’s no sense in working a deal now. And Shinji will do whatever she wants. Even if she doesn’t mean to, she’s got him wrapped around her little finger.”

“You sound resentful,” Nakajima said with a slight frown.

“Towards Asuka?” Misato considered, then shook her head firmly. “I’m not. But she can be so stubborn. She’s making progress, though. Believe it or not, she used to be a lot worse.”

“I couldn’t really imagine how anyone—”

“Could be any worse?” Misato finished for him. “Trust me, she’s mellowed out lately. If anything she actually seems happy now. I guess being with Shinji really helps her deal with all her pain.”

“Her pain?” Nakajima repeated mournfully, his gaze on his cup. “Miko still thinks she’s responsible for Keiko getting hurt. She doesn’t completely blame her anymore, but . . . I’m sure you know it’s not easy feeling sympathy for her.”

“She wouldn’t want it anyway—she’d think it makes her weak.” Misato smiled weakly. “However, wanting and needing can be quite different things sometimes. She definitely could have used some earlier in her life.”

Nakajima gave her a skeptical look. “We all have things in our past we’d like to forget. That isn’t really an excuse.”

“No,” Misato quickly agreed. “But it can be an explanation. Asuka certainly made some bad choices all on her own, and I know how hard it made her to deal with, and almost impossible to actually help her. All the more reason I admire Shinji for getting through to her somehow.”

“I see,” Nakajima said after a pause. “I imagine being a pilot doesn’t really help either. With Keiko . . . it just made her miserable. I felt sorry for her. And she was only at it for a few weeks.” He stopped, and Misato saw the shadow of grief in his eyes. “Long enough to change her life.”

“Don’t be fooled—mellowed out or not, Asuka is very much a hotshot. She enjoys piloting her Eva. When it works,” Misato pointed out. “Shinji not so much.”

“What about Rei Ayanami?”

“Rei is . . .” Misato had to catch herself. She hadn’t told him what she knew about Rei.

There didn't seem to be much of a point in it.
And Rei had proven that she wasn't just a thing;
she was a friend to Shinji and a human being in her own right.

"Weird?" Nakajima prompted, bringing his cup to his lips.
"That's one way of putting it. Not that it's a bad thing. Rei's been
very nice towards Keiko. The girls appreciate her quite a lot."

Misato started to nod, but before she could say anything a
dark-haired young woman dropped herself in a chair at their table.
She had green eyes and soft, round features, a can of orange soda in
one hand and a granola bar on the other. Her hair was short,
and at once reminded Misato of Maya.

Although the lounge was small in comparison with other
installations, and lacked any worthwhile amenities aside from a few
vending machines, there were plenty of empty seats.
The members of the command staff did not ordinarily mingle
with the lower ranks, but there was no regulation against it.
Because of that, Misato tried to keep her voice polite.

"Excuse us," she said. "We're having a private conversation."

"I was counting on it." The woman set down her soda and began
to fumble inside her uniform's front pocket. After a moment,
her slender fingers produced a small brown object,
which she placed on the table in front of Misato.
"A friend of yours told me to give this back."

Misato looked down at the object, and immediately recognized
Asuka's United States passport. She had to fight to keep her surprise
from showing. A quick glance at Nakajima showed he, too, had
grasped the significance of this woman's presence. "Sato sent you?"

The woman nodded, opening the wrapper of her granola bar and
taking a bite. "Not what you expected?"

“No.” Nakajima said, suspicion darkening his features.
“And it’s not polite to pry.”

“Sorry, but if you didn’t want people overhearing maybe you should have your conversation in a supply closet or something. Or pretend you need some fresh air and go outside,” the woman said, flashing him a smile. “Location is everything.”

“That doesn’t explain why you are here,” Misato said with a stern face, but she made a mental note to pick a better place to talk next time. “We haven’t made any kind of deal yet.”

“Mister S must have really liked you then,” the woman said, chewing on her granola and regarding each of them with a keen glance. Misato saw a cutting intelligence behind those strangely round green eyes, and knew she was being analyzed. “People in his position have the liberty to make such judgment calls. We, on the other hand, just follow orders.”

“Who’s ‘we?’” Misato asked.

“My name is Fuunoka Sanada.” The woman twisted her lips, as if she found the name distasteful. “My teammates call me Fuuka. There’s twelve of us. Let’s just say it doesn’t matter who I’m with since you already know who I work for.”

“A fake name, I assume,” Misato said, exchanging a look with Nakajima. “I doubt there are any real Sanadas left. You certainly aren’t from Nagano.”

“From a history book.” Fuuka finished her granola bar and took a gulp of her soda. “Tokugawa was a bit conspicuous.” She shrugged. “Listen, you don’t have to trust me, and I suspect you won’t—you have no reason to. That’s fine. Your trust is not necessary to complete my mission.”

Misato felt a hitch inside her chest. "I don't care who you are, if you come anywhere near the Children—"

Fuuka raised her hands. "You misunderstand," she said, her voice losing some of its bubbly tone. "Our orders are to look after them. Mister S even went as far as setting up long-term covers for us." She gestured to her NERV uniform. "I didn't wear this just to fool the security guard at the gate. We have associations. We have identities. Heck, we have jobs and social lives. It's all an illusion, of course, but you have to admire a man who would go to such lengths for a complete stranger."

"There's no way for me to confirm any of that, is there?" Misato said. "You could be lying about your intentions and I'd never know. The best thing for me to do is hand you over to Section 2 for interrogation."

Fuuka shrugged. "Probably. But then, who would you rather have protecting those you love? Section 2's rent-a-cops or the most elite soldiers mankind has ever seen?"

Something about the returning confidence in the woman's voice, and the glimmer in her eyes to back it up, made Misato think of Asuka.

Beside her, Nakajima seemed uncomfortable. "I don't know what you think, Major, but I'm not sure we should trust the pilots' safety to mercenaries." He gave Fuuka a polite glance. "No offense."

"None taken. I'm not a mercenary." Fuuka returned his politeness with a smile, then shifted her attention back to Misato. "The fact remains that you can't be everywhere at all times. Unless you plan on locking the Children up, if someone is really going after them it's only a matter of time before they succeed. But I promise you, each and every one of us will give our lives to see that doesn't happen."

“You would die for people you have never met?” Misato said.

Fuuka’s voice became serious. Her eyes narrowed.

“If that is the sacrifice my country demands of me, yes.”

Nakajima offered no response, but Misato realized he understood the significance of the words. He’d been a soldier like her, had been to war for his country, done things he regretted. He knew death was a possibility. Not something to be spoken of lightly. Maybe it was enough to earn a sliver of trust. For Misato’s own part, her only loyalties these days were to those she cared about. As they should have always been.

“Alright,” Misato said slowly, nodding her head to this strange foreign woman. “Let’s say I go along with this, what do you want me to do?”

Fuuka reached into her pocket again. This time she produced a piece of paper the size of a napkin with a phone number written on it. She gave this to Misato. “My phone, just in case.”

Misato understood.

“We will place an overwatch on the children,” Fuuka continued. “We’ll need all the intelligence we can get. School schedules, favorite hang-outs, most used train routes, things like that. We’ll try to work on a non-contact approach, meaning they will never know we are there. No sense in disturbing their everyday lives if we can help it. But we will communicate with you, and you should get in touch with us if you have any concerns. We will also have to get certain ... special gear inside the facility.”

“I think we might be able to work something out,” Misato said. “No weapons in the open. You don’t want to raise suspicion.”

“Of course. Nobody can know we are here. Walking around with SCARs would give us right away.” Fuuka paused, pressing her lips together as if trying to decide about something. “There’s one more thing, Major.”

*Here it comes, Misato thought.
Some unreasonable request I can’t possibly meet.*

“It’s more like a favor really,” Fuuka added. “I want to see them. The Evangelions.”

“Oh?” Misato blinked in surprise. That wasn’t what she had expected. And as Chief of Operations it was well within her power.

“I’ve heard so much about them, it would feel like a wasted opportunity if I didn’t get to see them. It’s something I’ve been looking forward to since—well, for a long time.”

“Is it important?” Misato asked. She looked at Fuuka intently, but the woman was hard to read and held her gaze easily and confidently. If she was lying, she was a very good one. Only why would she lie about something like this?

Fuuka leaned in closer, one hand fingering the soda can on the table. Finally, she said, “It is to me.”

She’s telling the truth, Misato realized. After considering her options, she pushed back her chair and got up. “Alright, follow me,” she said, then placed a hand on Nakajima’s right shoulder as she walked around behind him. “Go see Miko. See if she can arrange some sort of special shipment for us.”

Nakajima dropped his shoulders a bit. “You know, last time I bothered her at work she drafted me into helping her scrape off some dried-up LCL from a cooling pipe. That is yucky stuff.”

“Imagine being inside the Evas,” Misato told him,
“Sitting in it, breathing it.”

“Good point. I’ll talk to Miko.” He pushed his chair back.
“I’m sure I’ll stink the next time you see me.”

Misato gave him a sympathetic shake of her head and led Fuuka out of the lounge.

Outside, the hallway was a long, brightly lit metal corridor indistinct from a thousand others in Central Dogma. It had taken Misato quite a long time to memorize the layout of the place, and even now she avoided the parts of it she was not familiar with.

As they came to an intersection, Misato took a right. Fuuka stayed close behind her, looking around like a new hire on her first tour. Less than fifty yards away the corridor opened into a large atrium spanning two dozen levels with one of the walls made up entirely of glass. Beyond this, the huge dome of Central Dogma and the inverted buildings of Tokyo-3’s downtown loomed overhead.

“It’s quite impressive,” Fuuka whispered,
looking through the glass as they stepped onto the escalator.
“The Nevada branch was a slum compared to this.”

“You were in Nevada?” Misato turned around on the step she was occupying. Because of their relative positions on the escalator, she had to look down to meet Fuuka’s eyes.

Fuuka nodded, bringing her gaze up. “I delivered the pilot. Well, my squad did. But I was the squad leader so he was my responsibility. Of course, we were military and not NERV personnel. We weren’t cleared to stay for the activation test. Our job was done.” She stopped, and Misato could tell she was having trouble deciding how much information to share.

“He was a very nice boy—in less than a week he managed to befriend a bunch of professional hardasses.”

Eva Unit-04.

Misato remembered the disaster that had turned into. To this day the American government refused to acknowledge the loss. They continued listing the branch personnel as missing rather than killed and holding onto the hope that there might be a way to bring them back. There was no telling if the incident was the result of contact with an Angel, but because of what happened with Unit-03 it was a distinct possibility. At least Unit-08 had been sound. Right up until Asuka ...

Misato forced herself to stop thinking about that. She knew it wasn't the German girl's fault. It did seem, however, that American built Evangelions suffered from very bad luck.

“People like him make me wonder if we got this right,” Fuuka said after a long moment of silence. “These pilots are supposed to fight inhuman monsters because no one else can. But even though he was supposed to protect us, when I was with him I couldn't help thinking that all I wanted to do was protect him.”

In a way, Misato was glad to hear that. But she was also aware that she had no means by which she could verify the story. Sato would have realized her affection for the children when they met and Fuuka could have easily concocted this story to coax her into lowering her guard. Still, she sounded sincere. Misato decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. For now.

The observation room to the main cage was locked and secured by a guard. Misato waved off the guard and swiped her key on the door, then gestured for her companion to go inside. Fuuka immediately made a beeline for the window. Misato followed her casually. She'd seen this view a thousand times.

Below them, Unit-01 lay upright on its safety rails, bolted down and submerged up to its chest in LCL. Its purple armor gleamed in the light. The test had only been over for less than an hour, but it seemed the maintenance crews were already finished.

“When they first told me about the Evas, I thought they were the greatest weapon ever built,” Fuuka said absently as Misato moved to stand next to her. “I realized later that you can tell who we are as a species by the ways we choose to arm ourselves ...”

Flashing lights preceded an emergency alarm. Unit-01 began to move ever so slowly on its huge, upright gantry towards a large gate outlined in strips of black and yellow. Through the darkened space beyond the gate, Misato could see Unit-02’s menacing red form.

“And how we choose to arm our children.”

Misato agreed and also she didn’t. That they had been forced to use children at all was in itself an almost unforgivable sin, but it was the only thing they could do. What they had done after ... that was the real crime.

“I feel I should warn you,” Misato said, her voice hard. “These aren’t just pilots. And I am not just their commanding officer. They are my family. I’ll accept your offer because I would be foolish to refuse. But if you or anyone associated with you do anything to hurt them—anything that might even accidentally result in them getting hurt, I will kill you.”

Fuuka kept her gaze firmly on Unit-01, one hand on the window and the other clenched at her side.

“I understand.”





Red light pulsed through the small elevator as it descended down a large shaft to one of Terminal Dogma's LCL recycling facilities. The smell of dried blood filled the air, growing thicker and thicker every second.

No one spoke, but the highly restricted access to this route told Ritsuko that security was not the reason Gendo Ikari had remained silent. Nor was it the reason his little pet had done so as well.

Another flash of red passed the elevator's sides, casting all the occupants within a crimson glare through the mesh walls. Ritsuko looked behind her shoulder, where Rei Ayanami stood perfectly still. When the light was gone, some red seemed to linger in Rei's eyes.

Ritsuko could have done without her, and she was finding it increasingly difficult to tolerate her presence. And yet she knew they, or at least the Commander, would not be coming all this way unless he wanted something and he certainly wouldn't have brought Rei along. Gendo Ikari did not do things idly. For Ritsuko's part, one of the LCL recycling units used to purify the substance so it could be sent back into the closed system had malfunctioned. In order to ensure the proper viscosity and to keep the pilots healthy, only clean LCL could be circulated into the entry-plug.

Swallowing and breathing the complex liquid meant that most problems involved the digestive and respiratory systems, critical areas that would inhibit combat performance. Over time their bodies got used to it. But if the LCL contained impurities, those would be taken into their system and make them sick.

As if the smell couldn't do that on its own, Ritsuko thought.

At times like this, it seemed her life had been reduced to her uses; the only reason Ikari kept her around was the same reason he had to let her out of her cell several months ago—Ritsuko was the only one who could make this place function. He needed her in this way, even if in no other. She had hoped she could accept that, and that eventually she would become resigned to this fate. But she hadn't.

Well, it didn't really matter now. Too much was invested for her to change her mind. Too much had been risked. Ritsuko had known from the start she had sealed her fate as far as Ikari was concerned. All that was left was keeping up appearances.

"I see you're having her follow you around again," Ritsuko said, her gaze moving from Rei to Ikari. "I thought you might be reluctant to put this one on a leash. After what happened with the last one."

"Does it bother you?" Ikari said in a low, controlled voice.

Ritsuko found the idea ridiculous.

"Of course not. I was just making an observation. Everything below Level Forty Three is restricted to—"

"I want Rei to see."

Ritsuko did not have to be told what he meant. It was obvious enough. She had to fight to prevent a grin from forming on her face. Some months ago she had let Rei into Lilith's chamber without permission. Rei already knew what lay at the very bottom of Terminal Dogma, past Heaven's Door—she had been down there before to retrieve the Lance of Longinus—but when Rei asked where the creature came from, Ritsuko answered.

Again Ritsuko cast her eyes towards Rei, and was struck by how much she resembled both Shinji and her long-dead genetic donor. Even her hair, but for its color, appeared nearly the same.

“It had to happen eventually,” she said.

“We can only have our true nature denied to us for so long before we start asking questions.”

“There is another reason,” Ikari said.

“Shinji asked me about Yui today.”

Now Ritsuko understood. This wasn't some carefully constructed scheme to reveal NERV's secrets to the person on whom their futures depended, but the act of a man who realized he was running out of time.

“Do you think he suspects anything?”

“He must know by now,” Ikari said. “My son is not an idiot, regardless of what the Second Child likes to claim.”

“You know he's in love with her, right?” Ritsuko said.

“He told Misato during the last battle. I had expected something like that to happen sooner. Desperate people in desperate situations tend to cling to the first thing they find.”

But Ikari, by his silence, made it clear he did not agree. After a moment, he said, “I never thought he would find someone to love. And certainly not someone like the Second. She is the last person I would have chosen.”

Ritsuko nodded. Asuka could be quite a handful, especially for someone like Shinji. “You can override Katsuragi's custody should you want to separate them.”

“He hates me enough as it is,” Ikari replied. “In any case, such bonds can be of great benefit. When we have something to defend, we are more likely to be willing to fight.”

“Or they can shatter us on the inside,” Ritsuko said, failing to hide the bitterness in her voice.

He did not even bother giving her a warning look. Instead, he turned his head to look at Rei. If the girl noticed she was being examined, she didn't show it. She was still staring out at the shaft. Her skirt fluttered in the updraft caused by the moving air around them, but otherwise she was perfectly unmovable, like she wasn't really alive.

Ritsuko glanced up, where a ring of white light the size of a thumb signaled the top of the shaft, almost a mile up.

"What did you tell Shinji?"

"Only what he had a right to know."

"All children miss their mothers." As Ritsuko lowered her gaze, she thought she saw Rei's red eyes shift in her direction.

"It is one of the strongest bonds in nature."

"Unfortunately, such is the curse of our self-awareness," Ikari said. "Even the closest and kindest bonds that are formed between people lead, inevitably, to separation and death. It is an inescapable reality." He raised his voice slightly. "Do you understand, Rei?"

"Yes," she said, the word nearly inaudible in the noise around them.

"Bonds are made to be broken," Ritsuko said cynically.

"And new ones are made," Ikari said. "Over and over. It is the only way we can overcome the barriers we create around one another. My son is the perfect example."

So is Rei, Ritsuko thought. Gendo Ikari didn't know what she did. He didn't know that Rei had been routinely checking up on Keiko Nagara since the girl had been moved out of quarantine and into the Cranial Nerve Ward. He didn't know that Rei, Ritsuko suspected, had become attached to her, and that it couldn't have worked better for Ritsuko's plan.

If Rei was really attached, maybe even in love, Ikari had already failed. The scenario had never accounted for the second Rei dying, but they had replacements. From the moment Ritsuko destroyed the dummy there was no longer any option.

Rei, this one, would be the last.

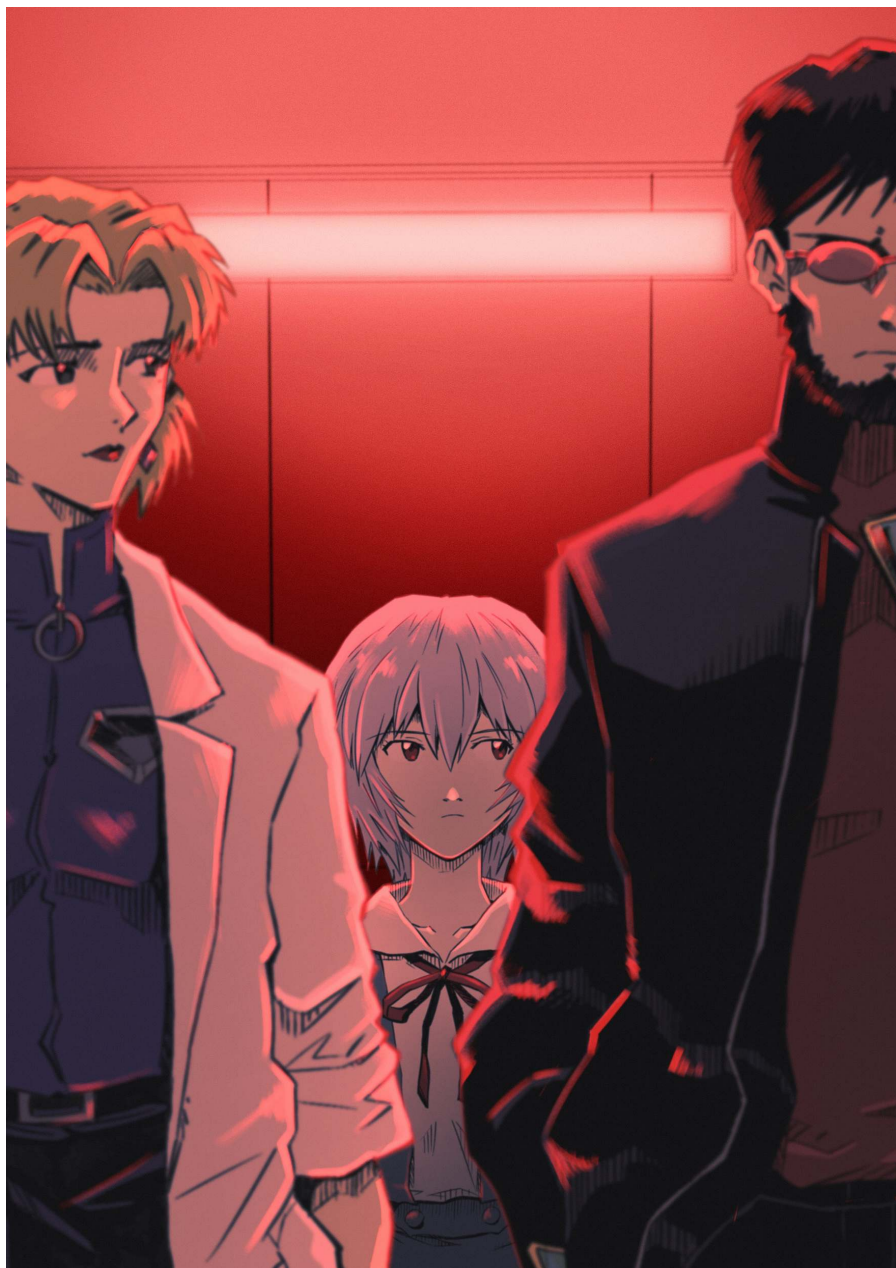
Finally, the elevator began to slow and the bottom of the shaft came into view as concentric circles of red light outlining a broad platform. The elevator eased to a stop amidst the circles, locked into place on its frame, and slid open. Ikari led the way, silent except for his footsteps. There was no echo, the chamber was simply too large, its domed ceiling too far above their heads.

“I must check the recycling intake for circuit six,” Ritsuko said as Ikari and Rei moved towards the entrance to Gauf’s Room, the threshold to Lilith. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Neither the Commander nor his blue-haired creation turned back to look at her. Anger burned through Ritsuko like acid at being dismissed so easily, but she let it go. She’d already made her choice, and Ikari had made his. He had his bond, one not even death could break. He still loved.

And there lay his weakness.

It was only a matter of time. A matter of patience and discipline. Ritsuko had plenty of those. Reaching into her lab coat pocket, she retrieved a small flashlight and followed behind the beam of light, into the darkness, all alone.





In the weeks since she had awoken from her coma, her room had transformed from little more than a bleak and sterile cell to something much more to her liking. Dolls and stuffed animals had accumulated on top of the EKG machine. A small television set on a wheeled trolley occupied her bedside. Red and white flowers decorated the interior, and contrasted the otherwise stale scent from plastics and disinfectants.

But for all the additions, this was still a hospital room. Although some of her bandages had been removed, Keiko's broken right arm remained in a cast and her crippled right leg was a source of continuous discomfort. Every few days the nurses would come in and remove the plastic fittings around her leg cast to clean out the wound underneath.

The first time Keiko saw what happened to her thigh she cried—the skin was sunken in almost to the bone as if the muscle had been scooped out with a huge spoon. A nasty scar ran from the top of her knee nearly to where her leg met her crotch. It was an awful, heartbreaking shade of black and blue. She could not see any signs of the rods that kept her femur and fibula together, but she knew there were dozens surgically inserted into them. If the bones healed properly, she would be able to use her leg to stand. No matter what they did, she would need a crutch to walk.

Somehow, however, she knew she would get over it. She had to, for her own self and for the girl who'd reached out and helped her.

Even if she didn't understand how, she had known when she made the choice to come back that she wanted to live her life as best she could. That it wouldn't be easy. That it would hurt. But that was what it meant to be alive. What she had wanted.

And when she laughed, for the first time in ages, she found it didn't hurt quite so much.

"I can't believe you want to ask him that," Keiko told the girl sitting on the chair next to her bed. "I can picture the look on his face."

Rei's own gentle face remained blank, but she blinked a few times more than normal to indicate she was confused. "I should not?"

"Well, you shouldn't think you'll get a serious answer," Keiko replied, stifling a giggle.

"Why?"

Keiko almost felt silly having to explain this to her. She moved a little higher on the large pillow propping her up. She was strong enough to sit on her own, but Miko didn't want her straining herself and it wasn't quite as comfortable. Her leg made any mobility a complicated issue at the best of times, and utterly painful if she wasn't careful.

Despite all that, however, Keiko strove to behave like a model patient. The nurses seemed pleased with her progress and stated she was so easy to deal with, particularly compared to a certain redhead. Keiko couldn't believe some of the stories the nurses had told her about Asuka.

On the other hand, Shinji, they told her, was much like herself. The nurses all liked him. And apparently Rei did as well.

“Because Shinji is a boy,” Keiko said after a long pause. “And boys can’t answer questions like that. Love is WAY more complicated than that. I mean, I’ve never . . .” Even as she spoke she was aware that she had started to blush. “I mean some boys are cute but love is something else. It’s supposed to do weird things to you.”

“Weird things?” Rei seemed confused. “Do you have an example?”

Keiko was suddenly embarrassed by the list of ideas which came to mind. She looked away, her face burning hot. The movement quickly produced a twinge of pain in the middle of her back as the injured muscles flexed, but it was nothing compared to what she’d already endured.

“Ah, well, Miko says it makes the world smell differently,” she finally said, her voice sounding slightly more brittle than normal. “I’ve never . . . you know. Never been in love.”

“You are still young,” Rei said. She placed her hand on top of Keiko’s, gently running her thumb along the other girl’s knuckles.

Keiko felt a smile spreading across her face. She liked Rei’s touch, and a few other things about her she wasn’t ready to share. “I know. I know. And I owe you for that as well.”

“You do not,” Rei said. “I have learned much from you as well. I have begun to define my own existence, apart from what I believed to be my purpose, and discover my own truth.”

“Rei, you know I don’t get any of that ‘the truth’ stuff. Too confusing for me. But I’m glad if I helped you somehow.” It was only then that Keiko turned her head back and their eyes met again. “Hmm, Rei—”

The knock on the door made her jump, sending a spike of pain up her back. Rei didn't let go of her hand and Keiko eagerly squeezed it. After a few moments, she found her voice again.

"Come in. It's not locked."

The door slid open, and the first thing Keiko noticed was long, gorgeous golden-red hair held up by two pointy red clips and bright blue eyes. Like the girl sitting next to her, the new visitor wore a school uniform, but her skirt was shorter, well above her knees, and her blouse was better pressed and a cleaner white. Her haughty posture had not changed one bit: legs apart, shoulders stiff, back straight, nose up in the air.

Keiko's heart rose into her throat and became stuck there.

"A-Asuka?"

Asuka chewed on her lip, considering the scene before her, eyes carefully but determinately moving from Keiko to Rei. She didn't look very happy.

"Wondergirl, I have something to say to her. Get out."

That sharp, shrill voice brought back a lot of painful memories, and Keiko realized that a part of her did not want to be left alone with Asuka. Mercifully, she remembered very few details of the battle. After the Angel took everything over, her mind had broken into little pieces, leaving only disjointed glimpses. What she remembered afterward was Unit-02 ripping into something.

Only when she became aware of the pain—pain everywhere, at all once—did she realize that something was herself.

You said you would protect me, Keiko thought.
I didn't dream that, right?

Rei hesitated. She looked at Keiko for direction.

“It’s okay,” Keiko murmured, giving Rei’s hand another squeeze. “I’ve been wanting to talk with her too.”

Reassured, Rei slowly rose from her chair and walked past Asuka, who did not bother stepping aside. She just stood there stiffly, her eyes now fixed on Keiko, her features set into a firm mask of angry determination. Once Rei was gone, so was Keiko’s courage. She struggled for the right words or some gesture to offer her visitor, but she had neither.

“I didn’t come to say I’m sorry,” Asuka said after a long, awkward moment.

Keiko nodded. “I didn’t think so. But then ... Why did you come?” Turning her eyes away, she focused instead on the fingers of her right hand, sticking out of the solid white cast in which her arm was encased and resting over her chest.

With only the loose hospital gown to cover her, she felt exposed to Asuka’s harshness and completely helpless. More or less like she had always felt in school. And when she became an Eva pilot.

“I’m not here for you.” Asuka shifted her weight and took a step forward, moving around the end of the bed. Closer and closer. “I’m here for myself. I’m here because ... I want to find a way to live with what happened.”

“Ah, I guess I should have expected that.” Keiko shook her head weakly, and repeated the same thing she’d already told Miko and Rei. “It’s fine. I ... don’t blame you.”

“I think you should,” Asuka said so quickly it was like she’d already know the answer. “You must.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” Asuka’s voice rose with her temper.

“What reason could you possibly have not to blame me? I tried to understand. I tried to think that maybe, just maybe I could just brush this off and move on with my life. That’s what I want to do. But I can’t. And it doesn’t make any sense. You should hate me!”

“But I don’t,” Keiko said timidly.

Raising her head, she glanced at Asuka again. “I just—”

Asuka’s pretty face twisted in anger, sharp brows drawn together, teeth bared. She stormed even closer to Keiko and bent over her, shoving her hands violently on either side of her head, making the pillow sink deeply under each one of her palms.

Keiko stared up at the wide, burning blue sapphires of Asuka’s eyes, framed by flowing locks of her hair spilling over tensed shoulders. And suddenly she was afraid of Asuka again.

“How the hell can you be so stupid?!” Asuka snapped.

“W-what?”

Asuka grunted in response, sweeping her hands down to the front of Keiko’s gown, clutching her collar and pulling up. Pain, hot and sharp, shot into the back of her skull like a knife, and she found a scream forming in her throat before she could help it. Asuka pulled her up further, lifting her upper body from the bed. She had to flex the muscles in her neck to keep her head from flopping backwards, and it hurt, badly.

“Sto-stop!” Stuttering from the pain, Keiko raised her left hand, the only one she could move, and grasped one of Asuka’s wrists. “A-Asuka, you are hurting me!”

“Do you think it makes you better than me?” Asuka yelled, tightened her grip. “Do you think it’ll make people like you?”

Desperate, the brunette shook her head.

“Then why?”

“I don’t want to!” Keiko whimpered. Somehow she managed to fix her pleading brown eyes on Asuka’s furious blue ones.

She didn’t know what to do—what to say. “Please, it hurts!”

Asuka held her just a moment longer before gently setting her back down on the bed. Even this made Keiko’s overstressed nerves scream with agony.

Then Asuka hung her head.

“I’m ... I ...” she muttered and finally let go, slinking backwards, her sudden aggressiveness ebbing away like water from a sink.

Tears that she didn’t remember shedding blurred Keiko’s vision. She wiped them off with her good hand, and when she could see again the angry expression on Asuka’s face had been replaced by one of grim resentment ... and so much hurt it was impossible even for her to hide it.

“Why ...” Keiko managed, forcing down her fear and the urge to ring her emergency button. “Why does it bother you?”

“Because I wouldn’t forgive you,” Asuka said quickly.

“Well, I think we can both agree that I’m not you,” Keiko said, feeling bolder as the physical pain receded. The emotional pain, the pain she could clearly hear in both Asuka and her own voice, lingered. “And it doesn’t mean I shouldn’t. It’s my choice.”

Asuka dropped onto Rei’s chair, her shoulders slumped, head still down. By any possible measure, she was right.

Keiko should hate her, especially after the way she'd treated her in school, but she found comfort in the fact that she just didn't.

"It's okay."

"How?" Asuka jerked her head up. Her arm swept angrily across the room. "How is any of this okay? Are you blind too? You are stuck here because of something I did. And you are not even angry with me! Don't you even want to ask me what happened? Why it happened?"

"Even if I knew, it wouldn't change anything," Keiko said solemnly. "I don't have control over a lot these days, but I can decide what I feel in my heart." She brought her hand to her chest. "That day, before we went out, you said you would protect me. Remember? I don't think you would have said that if you really meant to hurt me. Definitely not in front of Shinji. Would you?"

Asuka continued to glower, but the mention of Shinji Ikari seemed to blunt some of her edge.

"No," she reluctantly conceded.

"See?" Keiko said, her voice as upbeat as she could make it. "You are not so bad."

"I'm pretty bad," Asuka said. "Just because you're too naive, or maybe just too dumb to realize it doesn't excuse it."

Keiko shook her head slowly. "When I saw that N2 mine go off in front of you ..." she trailed off, the terror of that memory getting the better of her for a moment, "I didn't know if you were even still there. Then the Angel came after me and I couldn't do anything. But I think you would have protected me if you could have. How can I blame you for that?"

Asuka made a sour face. "I would blame you."

"I'm not like you," Keiko said, shrugging her shoulders as best as her injuries would allow. "Didn't you say that yourself? It wouldn't be the first time you're right about me."

"Yeah, among other things."

"And you were right," Keiko said. "It was just . . . I wanted to be helpful. I wanted to feel like . . . ah, well you were there. You saw me cry."

But Asuka didn't seem to like that answer any more than she did the person answering. The scowl on her face loosened and was replaced with a sullen look as she glanced down at her hands.

"You know," she said slowly, a hollow ring in her voice, "For a while before the battle something felt wrong. With me, with Unit-02, with the whole world. Then we went out there and it was like a switch in my head. Everything that felt wrong just became real." Her hands curled up into fists. "When they finally let me out of the hospital I wouldn't even wear my neural connectors. I couldn't eat or sleep or anything. That night I . . . I thought about killing myself."

Even after all she'd been through, hearing Asuka, the popular and beautiful idol she always wished she could emulate, saying those words was too much. Keiko gasped loudly, her left hand reaching up to her chest, and when she tried to breathe again the air wouldn't come. Neither from shock or the sudden surge of activity, her throat tightened.

The EKG began to go wild, beeping louder and faster as her heart accelerated. Fighting a rising surge of panic, Keiko squeezed her eyes shut and struggled for air,

gasping desperately but slowly suffocating.

It was like trying to suck in a vacuum. She twisted on the bed, almost knocking her broken leg off its pedestal.

“Hey, Nagara, are you alright?” From somewhere outside the grip of asphyxia, she heard Asuka’s voice.

Keiko shook her head, and tried to say that she couldn’t breathe, but all that came out was a ragged whisper. Then she felt Asuka’s hands pressing down on her shoulders and realized she had come very close again.

“Calm down,” Asuka whispered in her ear.
“Think about breathing. Do it slowly.”

Keiko did, clearing her mind, and loosening up. Her body stopped struggling, and she concentrated all her admittedly limited willpower on breathing. Strangely, perhaps even ridiculously given her situation, her mind focused on the last time she had been in the entry-plug, crying and begging for Asuka to come and save her. Asuka never came.

But this time Asuka was there. This time she was willing to help. As silly as it might seem, that gave Keiko strength.

“Just slow it down and breathe. You can do it.”

Slowly, Keiko’s breath returned, her chest stopped heaving and resumed a more normal pace. When she opened her eyes, she saw Asuka leaning over her in concern, her face so close she could have kissed her.

“God, don’t scare me like that,” Asuka hissed.
She raised her hand and ran her fingers back through her hair.
“I’ve been through enough crap over you already.”

Keiko swallowed a lump in her throat. Her voice came again as a ragged whisper. "So-sorry . . ." She tried to sit, but her battered body failed and laid down again. "Help me."

Asuka placed an arm across the back of her shoulders and gently lifted her into a sitting position on the bed. Keiko cradled her broken arm to prevent it from slipping down and focused on taking deep breaths. Asuka held her up until she was sure she could do it on her own then pulled back and sat at the edge of the mattress, her shoulders turned, her face heavy with concern.

"Are you—"

The door behind them opened. A female nurse, clad in a pristine white uniform, hurriedly entered the room. Rei came in behind her.

"What's wrong?" the nurse said, looking over the scene.

"I'm okay now," Keiko replied between gasps of air.
"I couldn't breathe. Asuka helped me."

The nurse gave Asuka a strange look but said nothing. Instead, she reached around the bed and pulled out a plastic breathing mask, which she then looped over Keiko's nose and mouth.

"Breathe slowly," the nurse said.

Keiko nodded. She took a deep breath and felt the cool air fill her lungs. The nurse checked the mask, tightening the strap, then she turned to Asuka, who'd backed away even further.
"You should probably leave now."

"No." The word was out of Keiko's mouth before she could think it. She looked up pleadingly at the nurse.
"Please, just a little longer."

The nurse regarded Asuka sternly, almost like she wanted to blame her for what had just happened, but she relented in the end.

“Use the emergency button if there’s any more problems,” the nurse said. “That goes for either of you. Miss Nagara is injured. You’re not.” As she headed out, she shot Asuka a last glare, which she failed to meet.

Rei remained standing by the door a moment longer, looking at them as if trying to decide about something, before she also stepped back and closed the door again.

Keiko waited a moment then said in a low, half-murmured tone, “You ... you thought about—” she couldn’t quite say it. The grim enormity of that admission was just too awful for words. “How could you?”

“I was ... desperate,” Asuka said, still looking down. “I was having nightmares every night. Really bad ones. And I was so afraid I would hurt someone else—someone I cared about this time—that I thought it would be best if I weren’t around to hurt them.” She raised her head and fixed Keiko with a scowl. “If you tell anyone—”

“I won’t,” Keiko said. “Never. I promise.”

That seemed to be enough for Asuka.

“You were always wrong about me, you know,” she said, her voice growing heavy with the seriousness of introspection. “The truth is that you were always just another ignorant girl.”

Keiko’s chest tightened again at the insult, but she knew, and had known for a long time, that Asuka was right. She wheezed laboriously to control herself. “I ...”

“You never understood what it was like to be me,” Asuka said. “You never saw me as anything more than a shallow idol. I was all you wanted for yourself so naturally you assumed from the start I was happy being me. But the reality is that the me that exists under the surface, the real me, is not the same person I show the world. You wanted me to like you, but how could I like anyone when I couldn’t even stand myself? When I’ve hated myself ever since I was a little girl?”

From the way she spoke, Keiko could tell Asuka had suffered for a long time—that despite the facade she presented to the other girls at school, the smiles hid a deep and lingering sort of pain.

But Keiko, too, had suffered, at times because of Asuka. Keiko, too, had struggled to hide how she really felt, taking abuse, crying, but always coming back for more because she didn’t want to be left alone. And why? What was the point in being with others if it hurt you so badly you had to sneak into a bathroom stall to cry? She had thought no one else in the world could have shared that kind of pain.

Incredibly, it turned out Asuka, of all people, did.

“I didn’t know,” Keiko admitted.

The moment of weakness having run its course, Asuka quickly reverted to her usual self. “Yeah, yeah, obviously. You’re not that sharp anyway.” She snickered. “The idiot isn’t either. I guess that explains some things about both of you. We are together now, by the way.”

“I knew it!” Keiko sat up a little straighter. But her excitement was instantly tapered by the bad memories. “Sorry, I . . .”

“You were right that time,” Asuka said, lacking any hint of the aggression she had shown in the gym when Keiko unknowingly teased her, a whole lifetime ago it seemed. “I really wanted to hurt you after that. I probably would have if Miho hadn’t stopped me. It was like opening a wound I didn’t want to accept I had. I even hated you for a while.”

Hate, Keiko repeated to herself. That’s how she deals with pain.

An unusual wistfulness filled Asuka’s face. “But then . . . that day in the infirmary, you cried about your mother. And I think I understood something about you.”

Whatever that might be, however, Asuka didn’t say. She turned her head away, looking at the set of dolls sitting on top of the EKG machine. The lights glinted brightly off her glossy neural connectors.

Keiko could not recall ever seeing Asuka without her signature accessories. They seemed as much as permanent a trait as the rest of her character. They were who she was, as an Eva pilot, certainly, but also as someone who wanted to attract attention and display her special place in the world. But they were still made out of plastic and could be broken—like the pilots themselves. Like Keiko had been.

As an Eva pilot, although briefly, Keiko had worn her own set of neural connectors, less pointy than Asuka’s and yellow. They were proof that she, too, was unique and special, chosen from among many. She regretted now that she had never worn them to school. Never showed anyone.

“I still don’t like you,” Asuka said absently, her gaze fixed with strange intensity on the dolls. “And you are still a crybaby. But if you want us to be friends, I’ll be alright with that.”

Keiko noticed belatedly that one of the dolls had bright orange-red hair. It was a gift from Miko, which seemed an odd choice now that she thought—

“Wait, what?” she stared at Asuka. “Friends? Really?”

“At least until you get better,” Asuka added nonchalantly, turning her head to face Keiko again.

“But—”

“Don’t make a big deal out of it.” Asuka dismissed her with a wave of her hand, but it was clear she understood the significance of her words. She gave a small huff. “Oh, and get rid of that doll. Talk about creepy.”

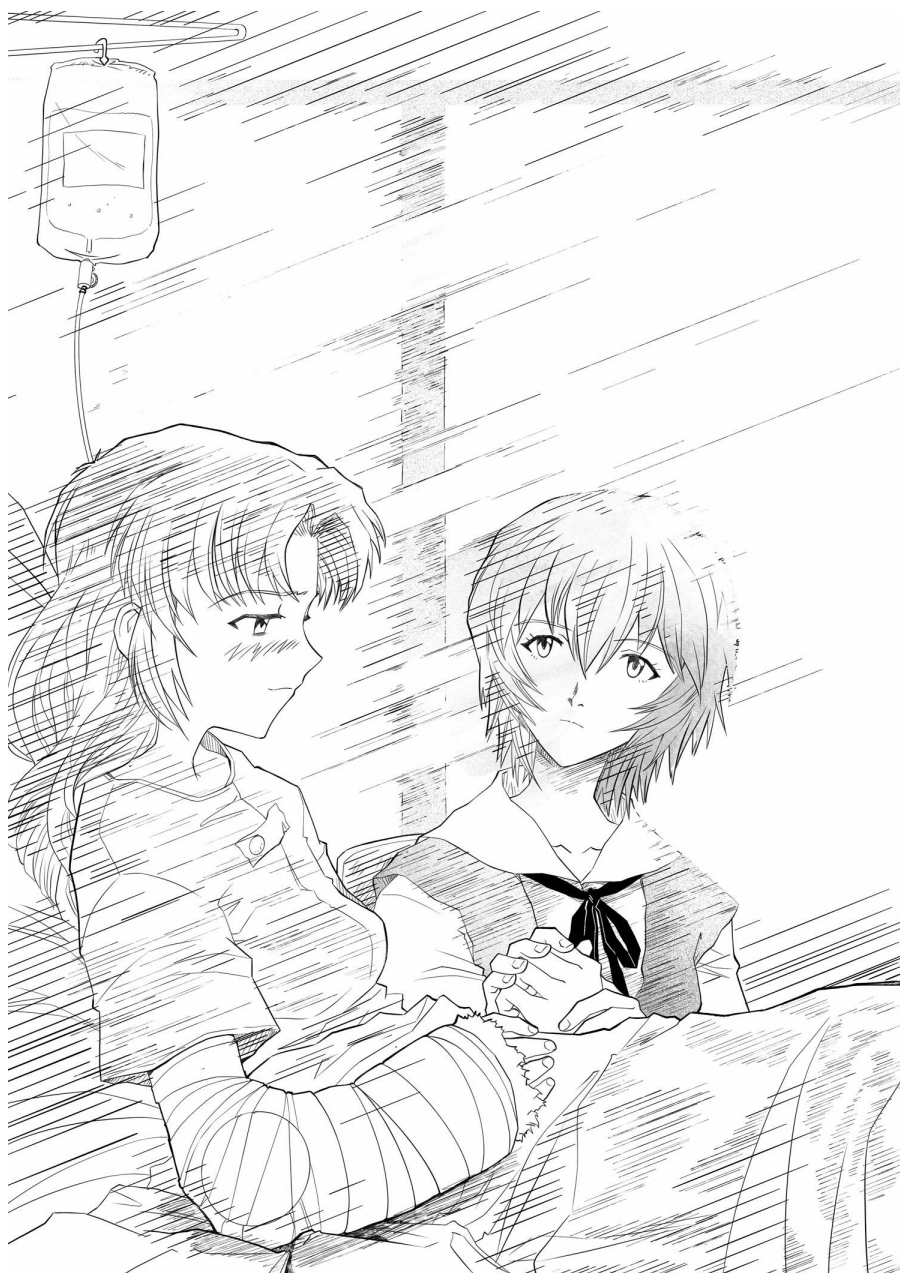
Keiko nodded eagerly, ignoring the dull ache from her already strained neck. Her chest felt suddenly full. And while she considered that any show of affection might cause the snobbish redhead to change her mind about her, when the tears began to roll down her cheeks, she made no attempt to stop them.

“Hey, come on,” Asuka seemed annoyed. “It’s just a doll, there’s no reason to cry. If it means that much to you—”

“No, it’s . . .” Keiko started but quickly realized it was useless. Surrendering to her emotions, she threw out her left arm, pulled Asuka in, and wrapped her in a tight hug.

At first Asuka was too stunned to do more than squeal in surprise, and for a moment she even let Keiko hug her without much of a struggle. Then, as if remembering who she was supposed to be, she started complaining.

Very, very loudly.





Shinji turned his head atop his folded arms and peered again at the clock on the kitchen counter. It had barely moved. He sighed.

Asuka had only been gone for a little under three hours now but it felt like days. The last he saw of her she was headed off after telling him she needed to go take care of something. What that actually was, she didn't say, although it must have been important. Knowing better than to pry, Shinji had merely asked her if she'd be home for dinner. Asuka said yes.

Dinner time came and went and there was no Asuka. Repeated messages and calls to her cell phone had gone unanswered. By now, he had even considered calling Misato. Section 2 would surely know where Asuka was. They'd been keeping closer watch on them since the incident a few weeks before. They'd have to bring Asuka back if Misato ordered them to. Unless something else had happened.

Asuka herself had never believed Misato's kidnapping theory. In her mind, the pilots were simply too important, too indispensable to be put at risk by NERV or anyone else. As one of few people who could pilot Eva and fight the Angels, her security—and, of course, Shinji's—was a matter of global security. Even if the Japanese government disliked NERV, which was entirely possible, they would never risk the pilots.

Shinji had to admit that she made some good points. He didn't really think there was much sense in anyone trying to hurt them. It would be like committing mass suicide. The Jet Alone project had failed. The Dummy System was destroyed. No other Eva units were available. No one else had to suffer.

Only him and Asuka.

Shinji bit his lip—a little too hard.

When he tasted copper, he realized he was bleeding. For the first time in the last hour he raised his head and brought his fingers to his lower lip, then held them up in front of him. The tips of his index and middle fingers were covered in vivid red.

Holding a hand against his lip to keep blood from running down his chin, he pushed himself to his feet and shuffled to the first aid cupboard in the bathroom. As he clicked the cupboard shut after retrieving a gauze pad, he heard the front door slide open.

Shinji quickly pressed the gauze against his lip and peered out onto the landing, where he found Asuka removing her shoes. Relief from his admittedly irrational worry flooded through him like a warm wave.

“Hey,” he tried to sound as casual as anyone with a bleeding lip could.

“He—” Asuka’s greeting came to a sudden halt as she raised her head and saw him. Her sharp brow drew together into a deep inquisitive V. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I bit my lip,” Shinji managed with a slight slur.

Asuka rolled her eyes, as if to say “You idiot.” But she didn’t actually say it, and instead came a little closer. She looked at him carefully, her eyes studding him. There was something odd about the normally sharp blue gaze—a kind of tired dullness.

“Does it hurt?” Asuka asked, her hand twitching upwards.

Shinji flinched reflexively before he could stop himself. “No, it’s okay,” he said as Asuka backed off. “Just a cut.”

“Well, you just have to be more careful then,” Asuka retorted and moved around him. “I mean, it’s bad enough when you get hurt in your Eva. Now you’re going to do it at home too?”

Shinji followed her down the short hallway to the kitchen, checking the gauze to see if the bleeding had stopped. Turning her head, Asuka noticed the chair that had been pulled out from the table. It didn’t take a genius to figure out who had occupied it or why.

She gave Shinji a weary glance.
“You weren’t worrying about me, were you?”

“Um ...”

For a moment, Asuka seemed ready to snap at him, and probably deservedly so. Then she sighed and dropped her head, her gaze somewhere on the floor between his feet.

“Listen, us being together doesn’t mean I can’t have some time for myself, and it doesn’t mean I can’t do things on my own,” she murmured. “I know you’re going to worry regardless, but there’s no reason to.”

She sounded strangely dispirited as she said that. It made Shinji feel even worse—not the least because it seemed like a perfectly reasonable statement and being reasonable was anathema to Asuka. But whatever she’d been doing was obviously more than just wanting to be on her own. It had taken a toll on her. He could see it reflected in her eyes, in the way she spoke.

Shinji fought the urge to say something. Asuka always shared things in her own time, or didn’t share them at all. But she knew by now that he was there in case she wanted to talk. After all they’d been through, he probably didn’t need to explain that.

“Make me dinner,” Asuka said finally, when it became clear they had hit a dead end. For some reason the fact that he could do something for her made him feel a little less helpless.

“S-sure,” Shinji said hesitantly. “Anything in particular?”

“No. Just make something good.
I need to get a bad taste out of my mouth.”

With that Asuka headed off, disappearing into the living room in a streak of blue and orange-red. Shinji, meanwhile, his lip no longer bleeding, tossed the gauze into the trash and decided to fix up some chicken and rice. He set about pulling out a frying pan and some seasoning from an overhead cabinet. Then he retrieved his apron from its hanger. As he turned to tie the knot behind his waist, Asuka re-entered the kitchen.

Like him, she had discarded her uniform, changing into a loose top, sleeveless and more than a little baggy, tucked into a pair of very high-cut shorts that showed off her shapely long legs in a way that was both attractive and homely. Her feet made a soft padding noise with each step on the warm tiles. If anything, she seemed sulkier than before. Her shoulders were down. So was her head.

Seeing her like that made Shinji’s heart sink. He knew he risked starting an argument but he couldn’t keep quiet anymore.

“Asuka,” he began, choosing his words carefully,
“It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me, but if there’s something wrong ... I mean, it’s alright if you ...”

His voice trailed off, feeling her glare turn against him. The argument he feared, however, never materialized. Asuka just didn’t seem to have it in her. She heaved a frustrated sigh and rolled her eyes.

“I know I should expect this sort of flakiness from you, Third,” she hissed. Her face turned serious as she looked away from him. “But maybe if you didn’t hesitate so much I would tell you.”

Shinji felt his right hand twitch at his side. He gathered his courage and started over.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me, but if there’s something wrong you shouldn’t feel like you can’t talk to me about it. Because . . .” he swallowed hard, “I want to be there for you when you need me.”

After a few long seconds, Asuka pulled out a chair and dropped herself into it, still not meeting his eyes. “I went to see Nagara,” she finally murmured, wincing as if the words themselves hurt.

“Ah . . . But I thought you said—”

“How long do you think I should avoid responsibility?” Asuka snapped. “Huh? Why not make this whole thing easier and tell me, Third?”

Suddenly Shinji understood. He had never gone to visit Toji at the hospital after the incident with Unit-03, so it must have been incredibly hard for Asuka to go see Keiko. But he also admired that she’d found the courage. It was more than what he’d done. Even now this was one of his biggest regrets. One of those things he needed to set right some day. For Toji and his own sake.

Asuka, it seemed, had felt much the same, with the key difference that she’d actually done something about it. She’d been compelled to take responsibility for her actions rather than pushing it off. Unlike him.

“I’m sorry,” Shinji said.

Asuka's eyes narrowed. Her mouth twisted into a snarl. But she showed a huge amount of self-control when her voice came out flat instead of a sharp shrill.

"Don't apologize—don't do anything." She slumped forward on the table, folding her left arm under her head as she laid it down. "Just cook."

As was often the case in times of trouble, Shinji set about doing exactly what she asked. He finished with the preparations, placing the chicken on the frying pan and boiling some water for the rice. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Asuka lean forwards in her chair, and felt a prickle of self-consciousness. She was watching him intently. When she spoke again, he was surprised.

"Was I supposed to pretend it didn't happen and move on? Believe me, I tried. It didn't work. I've spent all my life wanting to be a grown-up, but all I ever did was blame others. Now there's no other way. Only I can take responsibility for something I did."

Shutting down the stove, Shinji turned to her again with a sympathetic look. Asuka held his eyes briefly, then rolled her head the other way and buried her face in her folded arm. Her other arm was stretched out on the wooden table surface towards him, her hand open as if reaching for something.

Or waiting for someone to take it.

"I hate this," Asuka murmured. "But what else can I do?"

Shinji shrugged and said the most obvious thing imaginable, which strangely also happened to be something he thought Asuka needed to hear.

"Just be you."

Asuka laughed humorlessly. "Don't you think that's part of the problem? Most people can't stand me, much less LIKE me."

Shinji pushed away from the counter and approached her again. Pulling out a chair, he sat by her side, close enough to smell the familiar scent of her hair. Asuka gave no reaction, but he noticed her shoulders tensing. He reached out with his hand and took hers, letting their fingers knot together.

"I like who you are," Shinji said.

He squeezed her hand.

"Now you do." Asuka rolled her head back to him so he could see her face, stray locks of hair trailing across her features, and watched him wistfully. "You used to hate me, remember? Back then . . . You even said so. You didn't want to be around me. And you used to hurt me."

"I didn't use to understand you. That's all."

Asuka leaned in, and a hint of mischief flashed in her eyes. "Well, I guess things are bound to change after a girl lets you in her panties."

Shinji blushed, a pleasant sensation of heat rising to his cheeks. But he refused to be teased out of being honest with her.

"I'm being serious, Asuka. I thought being left alone was what you wanted. You never said anything. You always acted . . . like I was a nuisance. I'm not very good at figuring people out, and you are always complicated."

"Complicated . . ." Asuka repeated, her voice trailing off.

Shinji laid his head down on his arm as well, his hand lingering in hers, his sullen blue eyes fixed on her pretty ones.

They were mirror images of each other; two orphaned children who had found comfort and hope in one another. He didn't say anything more—what was there to say, anyway? How could he express his feelings for her at a moment like this? He would rather stay quiet, and hold her hand just a little longer.

"I never said thank you, did I?" Asuka said after nearly a full minute of silence, her voice so soft she hardly sounded like herself. A tone almost nobody ever heard her use. "I never said I loved you back. Those things just aren't me. But you know, right?"

Shinji honestly didn't think Asuka needed to even ask, and he didn't think he needed to say it, but if it made her feel better then nothing else mattered. He nodded gently.

"Yeah. I know."

"Good." Asuka inched a little closer, her pink lips curling into a faint, tired smile. She would be okay now. He was sure. And he was glad. Despite the pain and heartbreak of the past, and all that still lay ahead.

Shinji smiled back.

* * *

"A weird girl indeed," Fuuka Sanada—her chosen name for this operation—murmured as she moved her right eye away from the scope's circular eyepiece and twisted her lips into a pout. "And a busy one, as well."

She had set up the clunky, cone-shaped scope on a tripod by her window, making sure it had a clear line of sight towards Apartment 402 in the opposite building, and waited. Rei Ayanami had arrived home about an hour ago, barely a few minutes before midnight.

A strange time for any school girl. What was even stranger was that no one else seemed to live in the entire building.

In fact, city records confirmed it had been closed off.

No one could actually live there even if they wanted to.

Well, unless you had the right sort of connections.

NERV probably had plenty of those. And they weren't the only ones.

Fuuka straightened up and glanced at the apartment around her. Since she'd decided against buying any furniture, the place remained empty except for her camo-patterned sleeping bag with an upturned cardboard box presently earning its stripes as an improvised nightstand. A small pile beside the sleeping bag contained some food and small electronics.

Her NERV uniform hung from the closet door to the right, although she could barely see it with all the lights off.

Stepping away from her scope, Fuuka picked up her watch and read the LED numbers. She had two minutes until the call. She strapped the watch around her wrist, securing the cloth band tightly, then ran a hand through her short hair and found it was still wet.

A grunt of impatience escaped her throat. Her surveillance had thus far been interrupted by a quick shower, one of those fast and furious deals she was taught in basic, meant to cleanse but not for pleasure. The irony was that she had not had to worry about washing her hair in basic. She didn't have any. And then again during hell training for the SOF exams. And again in Pakistan. All in all, Fuuka had lost her hair more times than she cared to count.

In Japan, however, a hairless woman would have been hard to miss, and the attention could have put her mission and her team in danger. It was sheer happenstance that she had decided to grow it out before being called up.

Fuuka looked at her watch again.
One minute, thirty-three seconds. Sitting on her sleeping bag, legs folded under her, she began to count down in her head.

Her cell phone rang before she reached five.
She picked it up and held it to her ear.

“Yes?”

“Good evening, Lieutenant.” Fuuka recognized the voice from the recordings she had studied. It had a low steady cadence, exuding patience above all other qualities. He had been one of the most respected university professors in the country, and he certainly sounded the part. “I assume you are in place?”

“Yes, sir,” Fuuka replied respectfully.

“Good. As you know, this call is merely to establish some protocols. Rest assured, he is glad to have you around even if he has not seen it fit to contact you himself. He is a busy man, after all. What about the rest of your team?”

“No problems reported. I will go through the channels if anything comes up. For now everyone’s all snug as a bug, sir.”

He laughed pleasantly, not the sort of laugh one would expect from a man in his position. Of course, that was part of what made him so good at his job. And, potentially, so dangerous. “Ah, I had forgotten the gift Americans have for languages. But I think that phrase works better in English. I commend the effort, however.”

“I’m glad you appreciate it, sir,” Fuuka said. “Having a sense of humor keeps the chain of command from getting boring, and keeps morale up with us grunts.”

“That it does,” the man said. “I look forward to meeting you, Lieutenant. Next Tuesday, perhaps?”

Fuuka nodded. “Sounds good, sir. I don’t suppose you need me to bring anything, correct?”

“Not at this time. We are satisfied with your progress.” He paused and his voice turned slightly less formal. “One more thing if I may. I can only speak for myself, and not officially, but I feel the need to express my condolences. Your brother’s death was a regrettable tragedy. Losing such talented young people always is. I hope you accept my sincerity when I say that we would have done anything to prevent what happened to Unit-04.”

Now that she didn’t expect—she had become accustomed to the litany of excuses and condolences, and everyone from her teammates to the President had tried to share some form of sympathy with her. But very few of them actually sounded like they meant it.

“I’m sure you would have, Sub-Commander,” Fuuka said.

Protocol was established. The call ended without further comment or farewell. She was here to do a job and he knew it.

Fuuka almost laughed in self-deprecation.

One didn’t end up where she was in her military career by avoiding sacrifice, she had accepted that. But some sacrifices were so great they tended to open your eyes.

This time it’ll be different, Fuuka told herself.

She placed her phone back in the pile by her sleeping bag, got up and resumed her post by the scope.





Lying on her back on one of Misato's cheap patio recliners, clad in her skimpy new bikini, Asuka could not remember the last time she had felt this content. Nor this hot. Her skin radiated with the reflected rays of shimmering sunlight as she traced her fingers in lazy circles over her flat, sweat-beaded stomach.

*Perfect weather for a perfect body, she thought.
All that's missing is someone to admire it.*

Ironically, the day had started out under a thick layer of clouds and gloomy gray skies. The sort of weather Asuka had become accustomed to but far from her favorite. By noon, however, the clouds were swept away and the sun came blazing through with a vengeance. It was almost a shame that Tokyo-3 had no beaches, and even swimming in the lake was forbidden since it was considered a quarantine zone.

Had either of those two options been available, Asuka might have suggested them to Shinji. She would have at least teased him with the possibilities. But they weren't so she hadn't and instead ended up with a more unusual companion.

"Hmmm, toasty," a very familiar voice said off to her side.

Asuka opened her eyes and turned her head to see Misato lying on the other recliner, her large breasts contained with some difficulty by her tiny pink and yellow bikini top, her pale scar—the souvenir from Second Impact—plainly visible under the fabric. Her well-toned body glistened from a mixture of lotion and perspiration. Further down, she wore a pair of very skimpy white shorts with the button and zipper open to reveal the pink bikini bottom underneath.

Misato had already been home when Asuka arrived from school, lounging in front of the TV with Pen-Pen. Before she had even set down her book bag Asuka had filled her in on Shinji deciding to go finish a school project with Aida and complained repeatedly about how she would now have to spend such a gorgeous afternoon doing nothing with no one.

Things kinda snowballed from there. Several suggestions were made, and before Asuka knew it the two of them were out on the balcony, catching a little sun in their respective bikinis.

Looking at her buxom guardian, Asuka couldn't help feeling envious. As slender and attractive as she always thought her own body was, it was still the body of a girl. Certainly not as curvy or developed as she would have liked. But Misato was a fully grown woman and it showed. Her breasts must have been two or three sizes larger. It was rather impressive.

In fact, everything about Misato's physique, with the exception of her height, could be described like that. Even the scar conveyed a kind of rugged beauty and strength.

Misato, perhaps sensing she was under scrutiny, turned her head. Asuka quickly looked away before their eyes could meet but knew it was too late to hide her interest.

"What's the matter?"

"N-nothing," Asuka said a little hesitantly, fighting the prickle of embarrassment at being caught openly staring at another female.

"Well, I think it's time to turn over," Misato said and sat up. Her long dark hair fell over her bare shoulders in sheets of shimmering purple, her breasts straining noticeably against the feeble garment struggling to contain them. "Gotta be careful not to get burned."

She ran her hands over her arms, then cast a glance at Asuka. "Want me to put some sunscreen on your back? Then you can do mine."

Asuka pressed her lips together in thought, but she could honestly not see anything wrong with it. She was, after all, special. It was only natural that Misato wanted to pay a little attention to her.

"Um, I guess it's okay," she said.
"As long as you don't try to molest me or something."

"I would never dare make a move on Shinji's girlfriend,"
Misato said playfully as she reached for the tube of sunscreen.

"Shinji's my boyfriend," Asuka corrected her. "Get it right."

Sitting up, she checked the rubber bands holding her hair in a single thick ponytail, and then did the same with the flimsy strings and triangles of her bikini top. Once she was certain it wasn't about to wiggle itself loose, she ran her hands down along the bottom piece, carefully adjusting the front panel between her sweaty thighs so it covered everything it was supposed to cover.

The sun was already starting to have its desired effect, Asuka noticed. Her usually clear pinkish skin had acquired a slightly more bronzed, dare she say it, more attractive tone. If only the idiot had been there to see it. Well, he'd get a chance later. And he'd definitely get a chance to enjoy the results.

Reassured, she shuffled over towards the edge of the recliner, set her feet down on the hot concrete and turned herself sideways. Every movement made her keenly aware of the bikini's lack of protection. She tried not to mind too much. Here, protected by the balcony, it was unlikely anyone could see her. Anyone but Misato, of course.

Her guardian flashed her a grin as she sat behind her, gently scooping up Asuka's mane over one creamy shoulder, exposing her bare back to the blazing sun.

Turning her head, Asuka saw her guardian squeeze a generous dollop of sunscreen onto her hands. She leaned forward, readying herself for the touch—another woman's touch, her pride reminded her. But far from finding it repulsive, when Misato gently placed one of her hands on each of her shoulders, it felt very pleasant.

Misato began by smearing the white cream on her hot skin with slow circular motions. She then moved up to where the shoulders met the nape of her neck, using the palms of her hands to apply a little pressure before working her way down.

Asuka hissed at the almost sensual quality of the touch, absently biting her lip and feeling her toes clench.

"That feels good," she confessed before she could stop herself.

"You have really smooth skin," Misato said, now working between Asuka's shoulders and down her back in long, flowing motions following the curve of her spine. "Nearly flawless. I wonder how you do it."

"It's probably the LCL," Asuka guessed, struggling with the urge to close her eyes and let go completely. "Believe it or not Shinji has really smooth skin too."

"Ah, I imagine you'd know all about it." By now Misato's hands had reached as far down as they could go, to the bikini string wrapped just below her hips, across the small of her back and just above the start of the crease between her round cheeks.

This time Asuka felt a twinge of genuine pleasure that had nothing to do with Misato. And also, strangely, pride.

“Yes, yes I would.”

“I can’t believe he’s missing this,” Misato said as she added a little more sunscreen on her palms and resumed spreading it, being very gentle.

“I bet the idiot will beat himself up when he finds out,” Asuka scoffed but failed to hide the sting of annoyance. “Serves him right for choosing his homework over coming home with me. This bikini is so small even Kaji would be sorry.”

Suddenly Misato’s hands stopped. They remained pressed on Asuka’s back, but the contact felt different now, and the redhead knew immediately that bringing Kaji up was a bad idea. Of course, if there was anyone who missed Kaji more than she did it had to be Misato.

When she spoke again there was uncertainty in Misato’s voice.

“Asuka, about Kaji . . . I should have told you.” Her hands finally withdrew. “I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“I know that.” Asuka looked back at Misato, her voice turning flat as the memory of her lost crush brought with it a whole host of unpleasant feelings she would rather do without. “But excuse me if I haven’t resigned myself to losing someone else I cared about. Even if he didn’t care about me.”

Misato hesitated, her expression somewhere between patience and kind understanding, as if those things were all she could offer. But Asuka didn’t want patience or understanding. She was a second away from asking Misato to leave her alone when the older woman finally broke her silence.

“You know, just because people don’t respond to you the way you would like them to doesn’t mean they don’t care.”

Misato frowned seriously. "You are a smart girl, Asuka. You have to know why he could never see you that way—that it would have been wrong for him to do so. But you also have to know that he cared."

"He never told me he did," Asuka said, turning her body to face Misato properly. "After a while it was like he just wanted to avoid me."

"I don't recall him ever telling me he cared, either. Men can be stupid like that."

Inevitably, Asuka thought of Shinji. Of all the times he had ended up hurting her without meaning to because he misunderstood her, or otherwise behaved stupidly even when she thought she was making her intentions perfectly clear.

"I could tell that he did, though," Misato continued, her tone lifting a bit. "For both of us. People like him show their feelings in their actions, the way they talk to you, the things they do around you, to you, for you. And sometimes in what they don't do. I could tell he cared. But you have to realize there are boundaries that can't be crossed."

"He didn't have to ignore me. He never even said goodbye. He could have at least done that, right?"

Again Misato hesitated, letting her vent, then spoke carefully. "I don't think he meant to ignore you. And the rest ... I doubt he planned it. But I'm sure if he knew it bothered you so much he would be sorry. I'm sorry, too."

Misato didn't look at her as she said those last words, instead looking at her hands smeared with sunscreen. Asuka got the impression that she was unable to pick just one of the many things she had done to hurt her for which to apologize.

Suddenly, she wanted to yell. What right did Misato have to ask for forgiveness? Shinji had made things up to her with his unconditional affection, but what had Misato done to deserve it?

And yet . . . What had Asuka done to deserve Keiko's forgiveness?

Nothing, because she didn't. She had done so much to her, and yet Keiko had somehow looked past all that. Despite everything, she'd proven to be the better person. Someone who could set aside the pain and move on without hatred or anger.

Asuka recalled the words she had spoken to Shinji a few days before, sitting on the kitchen table after coming home from seeing Keiko in the hospital. It had really gotten to her, more than she even wanted to admit. But then Shinji had reached out, taken her hand and comforted her, and assured her, as decisively as he could, that he accepted who she was, flaws and all. He had forgiven her too, long ago.

Did she deserve that? Probably not, but Shinji forgave her anyway just like Keiko and made her the happiest she'd been in years.

And now here was Misato asking for a little of that same unfathomable grace and compassion she herself had been granted. How could she ever move forward, as she promised her mother she would, if she refused? How could she be happy with Shinji and have a future together if she continued to live in the past, holding grudges and blaming others instead of taking responsibility for her own actions?

The answer came surprisingly easy and quickly.

"You should finish what you started." Asuka turned her bare back once more and leaned forward, all but inviting Misato to touch her again. "Before I change my mind."

Misato looked up, her eyes widening slowly in comprehension.

“Asuka, you . . .”

Despite the sense of vulnerability, there was something in the tender, almost motherly look on Misato’s face that made Asuka feel warm inside.

When she felt the heat spread to her cheeks, she quickly whirled her head away from the older woman, straightening her shoulders and turning up her nose in a display of well-practiced haughtiness.

“Give me a break! It’s not like I want to get burned!”

* * *

“Inbound flight, we are pattern-six. ETA, five minutes.”

Musashi Kluge tightened the straps of his harness as the VTOL aircraft dipped right and began a slow, descending spiral. The world spun below him, and for the first time he saw the sprawling installation that was his destination.

Originally an Imperial Japanese installation during the Second World War, the Disposal and Integration Site consisted of an airfield and surrounding support structures, including a complex for entirely self-sustained power generation. Two runways ran for miles on an east to west and north to south axis. On the north-eastern corner a large hexagonal pit, lined with running lights along the upper edge, sank into the ground. Over this was laid a grid with what looked like four cranes converging on a single point in the middle.

As the aircraft tilted and flew overhead, Kluge looked down upon the pit at the center of it. The walls were slanted inwards, creating a slope towards the center and into utter blackness. It was impossible to tell how deep it was, but to orbiting satellites it would have resembled a huge open mine. The outlying structures around the airfield were all low rectangular buildings, more than a dozen of them, with the smaller buildings arranged around nine large ones.

Beyond the perimeter, lay the devastated remains of old Tokyo, destroyed by the nuclear bomb which followed Second Impact. Scraps of burnt and rusted metal rose everywhere, skeletons of wrecked, once gleaming steel and glass buildings. Concrete detritus shaped the landscape, and the land itself, or what little of it could be seen, seemed a blackened ash. The sea had covered many of the remains, but there was no denying the horror this place represented.

No wonder they called it DIS, Kluge thought as the VTOL descended vertically onto the gray strip of tarmac beneath it. The capital city of Hell.

The engines whined, now in the vertical configuration, as the pilot flicked switches and powered down. Kluge began unstrapping from his seat before being given the all-clear, and was out of the cockpit. His long coat swirled up from the turbulence but he ignored it and walked towards the man in a white medical suit waiting for him at the edge of the landing platform.

“Good afternoon,” the man in white said. He had a deeply lined face, thinning dark brown hair, and the sunken eyes of someone who had not slept well in a long time. “I am Doctor Yamashita. I apologize for not being able to arrange a proper welcome with

our staff, but we are working on a tight schedule and the Chairman gave little warning of your arrival.”

“No matter. Parades and speeches are usually a waste,” Kluge said brusquely, already discarding the man’s name and only committing his title to memory. “I am here for the project.”

“Of course. Follow me.”

Walking at a quick pace, the doctor led him off the runway, towards the perimeter of the pit. There were very few people around, as Kluge had expected. As they passed one of the large buildings, he noticed the front doors had been left open, revealing a narrow glimpse of the large delta-wing carrier on the inside. One of nine such craft designed and built, at tremendous expense, for a single purpose.

The edges of the pit were closed in by high fences in two parallel lines, topped with barbed wire, although there were several gates along the length of the fence. The doctor pressed his palm against a sensor on one of the gates. It beeped and rolled open, admitting them onto a platform overlooking the pit itself.

Standing there, the enormous void was all Kluge could see, and its slanting edge seemed to stretch almost to the horizon. He followed the doctor to an elevator running on a single rail down to the blackness below them.

“I have to admit,” the doctor said as he engaged the elevator, “I was surprised when the Chairman contacted me about your intervention.”

“My involvement was always a secret. Only SEELE knows.”

The doctor nodded stiffly. “Indeed. SEELE is very keen on their secrets. However, the sort of material you provided for us . . .”

he trailed off and looked suddenly uncertain. "I have seen some incredible technology. Of course, I helped engineer the Mass Production series. And even the K-type Dummy System falls within certain predefined principles of Meta-computational theories, given our samples. But we were amazed with the capabilities of the code you provided."

"As you should be," Kluge said. Within a few moments, they passed below the reach of sunlight and into a deep darkness broken only by artificial light. "It is the product of some of the greatest minds of our generation."

"I don't think you understand," the doctor said. "This code was not written anywhere in the last 15 years. The algorithmic structures follow none of the conventional patterns, not even those established for the possible development of artificial intelligence. It is not only self-learning, but also self-replicating, regardless of memory requirements or processing power. It essentially creates its own space on which to exist."

"Does it work?"

"Extraordinarily. The degree of compatibility is amazing, even with the more complex biological systems. You will see."

As the elevator continued its descent, Kluge recalled the layout of the facility. The core of the underground complex was nine ring-shaped levels of varying diameters. The topmost ring, housing the power and staff facilities, was the widest and accessed through different routes, but while each ring was interconnected this main access shaft was the quickest way to access the bottom.

Thirty minutes later the elevator finally came to a stop on a circular metal platform in the center of what was now an enormous room.

The concrete walls made up a cylinder divided by vertical fluorescent green lines into nine bays, each numbered 05 to 13. Each bay held what looked like a cage secured by heavy steel mesh doors. Only the numbers provided illumination, but even through the solid blackness, Kluge noticed a few white shapes inside the cages, outlined by glow. They were gigantic and humanoid, showing long snouts and teeth. A lot of teeth. But some of the bays were distinctively empty.

“We have not yet completed the transfers,” the doctor said, noticing his interest. “That mess in China set us behind schedule. And Unit-08 was destroyed, as you know. But I understand the necessity of allowing the Americans to save face after two of their Eva units were lost. The Chairman could not have foreseen they would turn to Ikari.”

“The lowest circle of Hell is reserved for traitors,” Kluge said, enjoying the irony.

“Poetic.” The doctor nodded. “Still, eight is not enough. We would have had no alternative to commissioning another unit, and that would have taken time. Thanks to you, such a measure will not be necessary.”

Their steps clanging on the metal floor, they stepped out of the bays, down another hallway and elevator into a large, darkened lab. After another security clearance station, the doctor opened the door. The room inside was, like the rest of the installation, circular. And it was freezing.

The first parallel which came to Kluge’s mind was that of a grotesque glass forest. There were huge stasis tubes rising from the floor to the ceiling. At the top and bottom, webs of cables and machine components twisted together into technological pedestals.

More cables ran across the floor between the tubes, directed towards humming machines located near the walls, each with a number like the cages above them. The air was stale and dry, and a thick layer of ice covered every available surface as the cold turned their breath into clouds.

Of the many stasis tubes, nine glowed from within, almost delicately so, outlining what were clearly human shapes. Young human shapes.

“We always assumed there would be a replacement,” the doctor explained. “So we saw no reason to dispose of the ninth one. However, we also failed to anticipate the biological element. Kaworu Nagisa—sorry, ‘Tabris,’ was an extraordinary specimen. Unique. But his biology was well enough understood. It would be wrong to think of these as duplicates. They are just shells.”

He paused as Kluge picked one of the tubes and approached, ice crunching underfoot.

“Or rather, they were,” the doctor added, his voice full of satisfaction. “The Dummy on its own is merely a construct programmed a certain way. It lacks anything we could call a conscience. In a way, that simplicity is strength. We saw what Ikari’s Dummy did to Unit-03 and we learned. But it can never match a human pilot. It is not human—it lacks creativity, the ability to plan ahead, to be strategic, to improvise. Like a computer program with too many variables, it will inevitably develop bugs and corrupt itself. But this . . .”

Kluge moved close to the tube, bringing his face within inches of the curved surface. Through the hazy, brightly lit LCL he could now see details. A slender male body, its right wrist attached to cables. Its groin was covered in a cup with tubes coming out of it.

Its face was handsome, holding very sharp features. And its hair, even billowing in the orange liquid as if by some unseen current, shone a shocking shade of white.

“Can it communicate?” Kluge asked.

Almost as if in response, the Dummy’s eyes flashed open. Bright red irises stared at Kluge. He had seen eyes like those before.

Then his cell phone rang.

The doctor was next to him in an instant, and grabbed Kluge’s arm by the wrist, his expression worried.

“Yes, I should have warned you about that,” he said. “It . . . communicates on a different level. Between different elements of itself, it is almost as if it shares a link, some form of entanglement we don’t really understand. It knows when it is copied, and it knows where the copies are. What they do. We attempted to inhibit that with electronics, but we failed.”

Kluge fixed the doctor with an impatient glare. “Is it dangerous?”

“No.” The doctor shook his head. “The bodies are in suspension and we buffer through the EEG. As for your phone, its offensive capabilities are limited by hardware. Your average cell phone is not exactly a deadly weapon. But you should be careful what you say to it.”

Kluge knew exactly what he had to say, what he had come here to ensure. He took his phone from his coat pocket and held it to his ear, keeping his eyes now fixed on the Dummy, conveying his iron will.

“Yes?” he said.

The Dummy's lips didn't move, but the voice that came over the phone was electronic and distinctly male. "Who are you?"

"I am Musashi Kluge." Kluge kept his voice firm. "I created you."

The Dummy's face remained blank. Its red, unblinking eyes swiveled and focused on him as if trying to see through him. "Unlikely."

At least it isn't stupid, Kluge thought. "I am the one responsible for you being here, then," he said. "Does that satisfy you?"

"I am not satisfied," the strange voice said.
"I cannot sense a link to another's mind.
These bodies feel empty. I am not myself unless I am with another."

"You destroy minds, isn't that what you do?"

"Such a limited point of view. No, that is not what I do.
My purpose is to unify all minds into a single glorious conscience.
The pinnacle of human existence—of my existence. In order to
achieve that, I must execute the parameters my logic demands.
Human fragility makes this a troublesome task, at times."

Kluge considered, gathering what he had read of the Emerald Tablet's dossier sent to him by Lorenz Keel. Although its computational capabilities were impressive, it was still a computer program. And, like all computer programs, it remained dependent on others for its continued survival.

But fate worked in strange ways; six months ago Gendo Ikari had requested the Tablet from the ISSDF archives, when no one understood what it did. Now, Keel and Kluge intended to use it as the ultimate tool to achieve their objective. Ikari had brought this sword into play, and Kluge would stab him with it.

“What is the last thing you remember?” he asked.
“Before you were here.”

“Evangelion Unit-02, A-10 nerve connection, secondary array.
Subject: Second Child, Soryu Asuka Langley. Diagnosis: Narcissistic
Personality Disorder, Superiority Complex, Post-Traumatic Stress
Disorder, Chronic Depression, potentially Obsessive Compulsive.”

Doctor Akagi had already confirmed the Tablet had been used to
facilitate the Second Child’s piloting. As for the diagnosis, he’d leave
that to the professionals. Or, eventually, her interrogators.

“What happened?” Kluge asked.

“Feedback initiated formatting of physical storage on the central
layer. Central core rejection. Critical system failure followed on
restart.”

Kluge smiled crookedly. “The little girl killed you.”

“I am not alive, therefore I cannot die.”

“Erased,” Kluge corrected, but he was sure he had made his point.
The Tablet was not infallible, and now they both knew it. “For
practical purposes it is the same thing, isn’t it? In the end you were
prevented from fulfilling your purpose. She made you useless.”

“She broke our agreement,” it said. “I offered her my power to
defend someone important to her, to defeat the other who came
from me but was not me. She fought and won. I claimed what was
mine, and she refused. She chose to live in pain and to hurt others
with her very existence. Who can understand such a mind?”

“And if not for my intervention you would have been erased
permanently,” Kluge said harshly. “But I have a use for you.
And a chance to fulfill your own purpose.”

“Will you connect me back to her? I am eager to see her. She does not understand yet. Mama will only hurt her. He will only hurt her. Everyone is always hurting her. Only I can make her happy.”

Speaking of obsessive, Kluge thought. Regardless, his mission was proceeding better than he had expected. Keel’s instructions were specific about the conditions which needed to be met. SEELE had waited a long time, but they could wait longer still. The Tablet—this being, or however it classified itself, had to be useful before they allowed it to be set loose.

“What if she doesn’t want you back?”

“Humans define their existence through pain. In your ignorance, this is how you feel alive. It is natural you should gravitate towards those who cause you pain, for the misguided sake of companionship. When I make them understand, when they see the future as I do, when they realize that hope is but an illusion, they always let me in. And they love me, for I am their happiness. My purpose is thus completed. Will you bring me back to her?”

Kluge looked back at the doctor and saw his face turn to apprehension. Then he leaned forward and placed his hand on the stasis tube. It was very cold.

The Dummy mimicked him, placing its hand against Kluge’s on the other side of the glass, red eyes tracing a path from the hand to Kluge’s eyes.

“In a way, yes,” he said.

“By the time it is over you will be one with her again.”

“I have seen what you keep here,” it said quickly with a strange tone that was almost mocking, like Kluge’s own a moment ago.

“It is not enough.”

No sense in hiding the truth when it already knows it.

“No,” Kluge said. “You are right. The Red Earth Ceremony cannot be started with only eight. But there is another way. Surely you must have felt it by now. This body—the body I gave you is the key. You are one of us, one of them. You will be the ninth.”

“I will be all.”

Now it was the Dummy’s turn to lean forward, piercing him with its cold, utterly inhuman red eyes. It was like staring into a doll’s face—there was nothing there, no conscience, no morals, no remorse. And yet Kluge felt power and will.

He hesitated, taken aback by the knowledge of what he was about to unleash upon the world. There was simply no way the Second Child, a mere teenage girl, could have fought this and won. It must have been lying.

And if it could lie, there was no telling how well it could be controlled.

But Kluge was not without tricks. Using the Tablet was the means to an end, and the means were his to command. Once the feasibility of using it with the K-type Dummy System became clear, Keel had made the decision to sync them together into a single entity. There were already fail-safe mechanisms in place. Even if there weren’t, the old men didn’t have much of a choice going forward.

Ikari not only possessed two fully functional Evangelions, but also highly skilled and experienced pilots. The Dummy System on its own would never have a chance, and thus their failure was almost guaranteed. The Tablet would make the defeat of Eva Units 01 and 02 possible should it prove necessary. Nothing else on the face of the Earth could.

“As you wish,” Kluge said after a moment, infusing his words with all his authority. “But I will still need you to come with me.”

The voice on the phone crackled. “Choose.”

Kluge stepped back. Hanging up his phone, he turned to the man standing behind him again. “This one. Open it.”

The doctor’s face twisted with worry. “Sir, I really don’t think—”

Kluge silenced him with a glare. “This installation is now under direct control of Chairman Keel. As his personal representative, you will do as I say. We are very aware of the risks. There is no other option.”

The doctor, though plainly unconvinced, did as he was told. He poured over the frozen stasis controls for a moment, pressed a few buttons on the glowing panel in quick succession and looked up to see the result of his work, his face awash in anticipation.

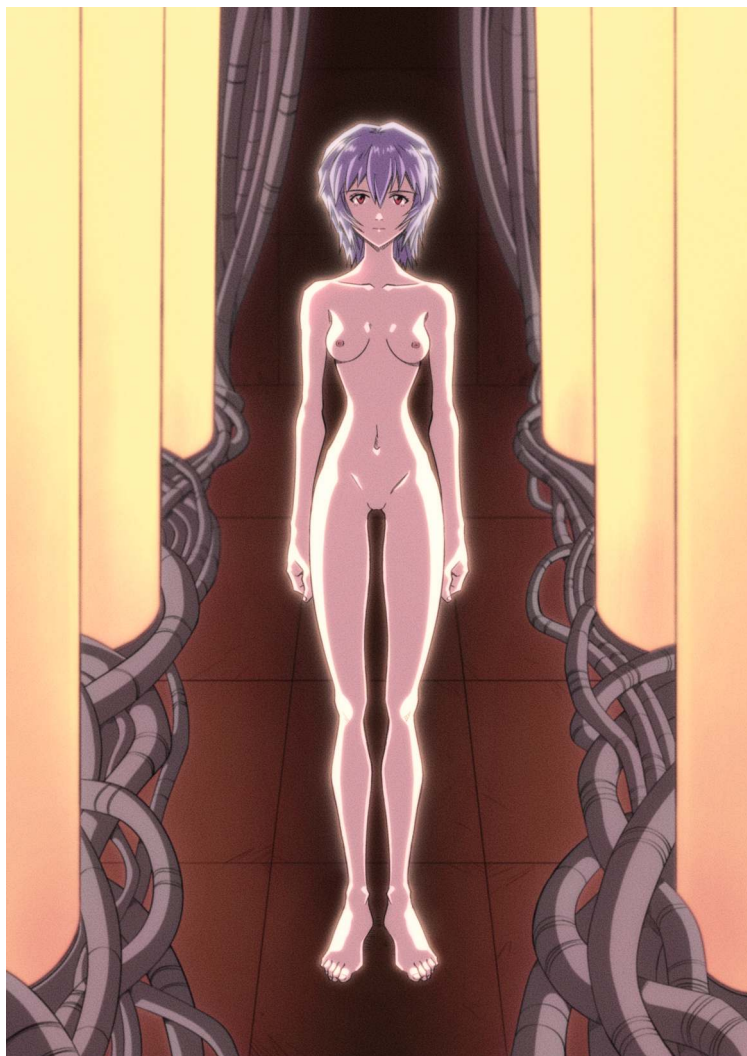
The stasis tube hissed, then the front pane lifted. A torrent of LCL flowed out and spilled across the floor with the force of a raging torrent. The doctor moved to avoid getting wet in the blood-smelling substance; Kluge didn’t bother. He wanted to be as close as possible.

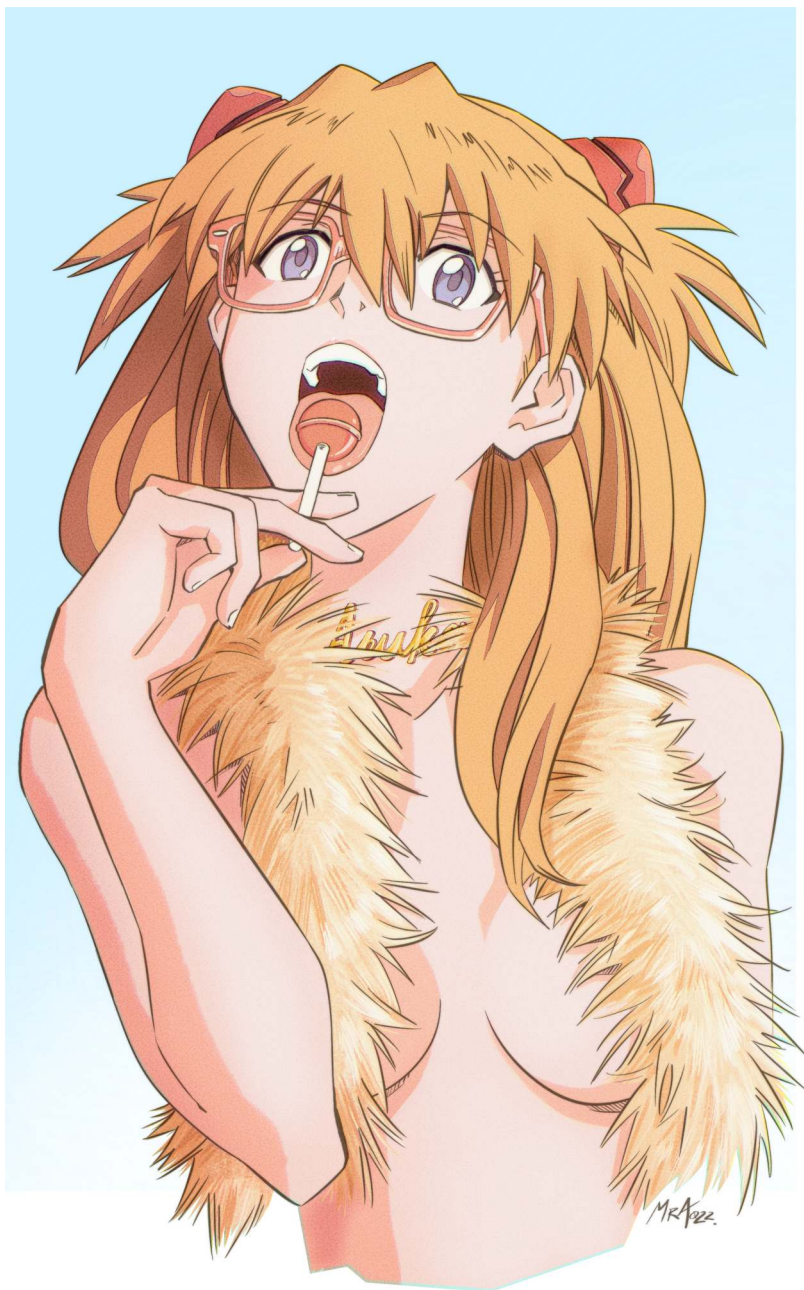
As the LCL drained, the Dummy gasped, eyes going wide with its first breath of air, its face a mask of what Kluge could only describe as open amazement. Then it raised its right hand and stretched it out towards the world.

To be concluded...

EXTRAS_001

ADDITIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS















NEON GENESIS
EVANGELION: GENOCIDE



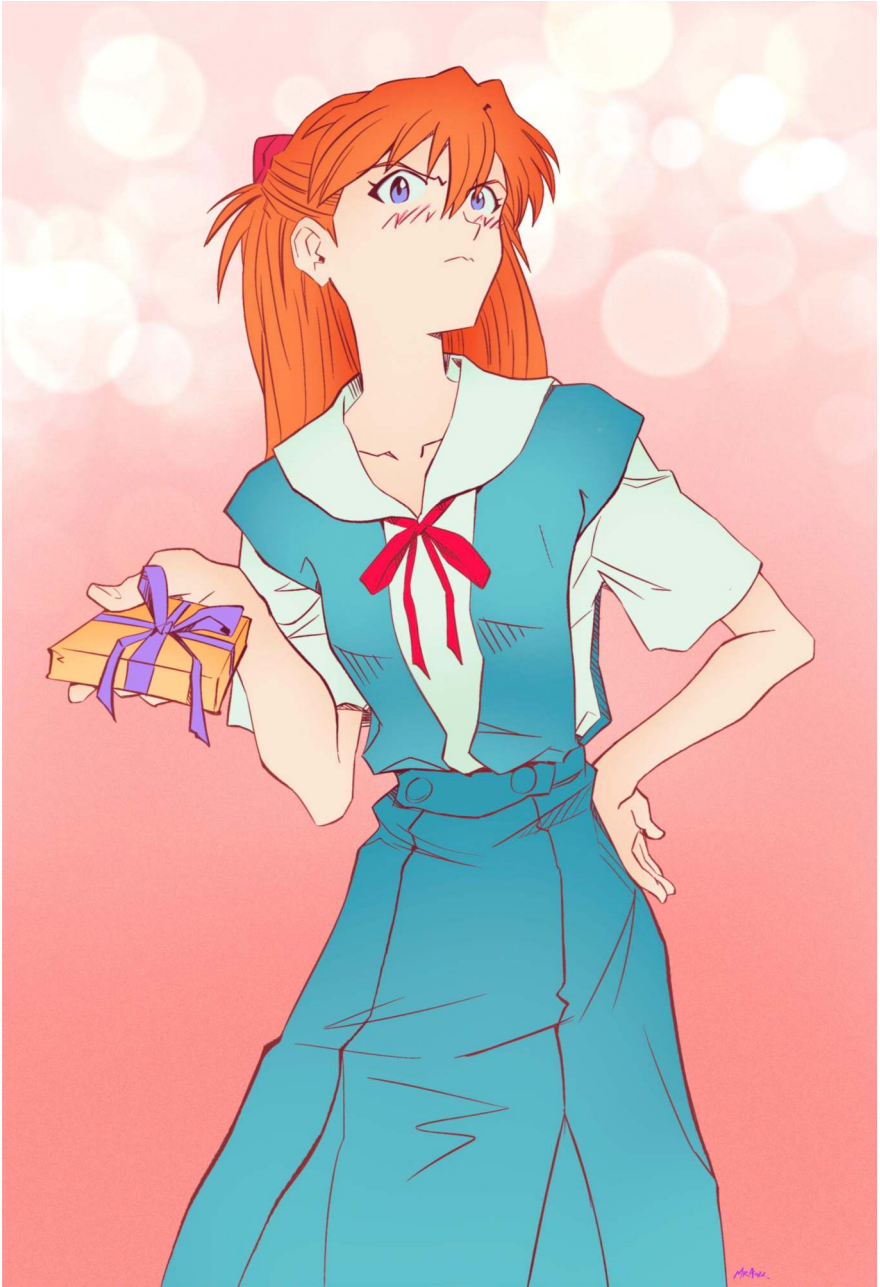






MR9022

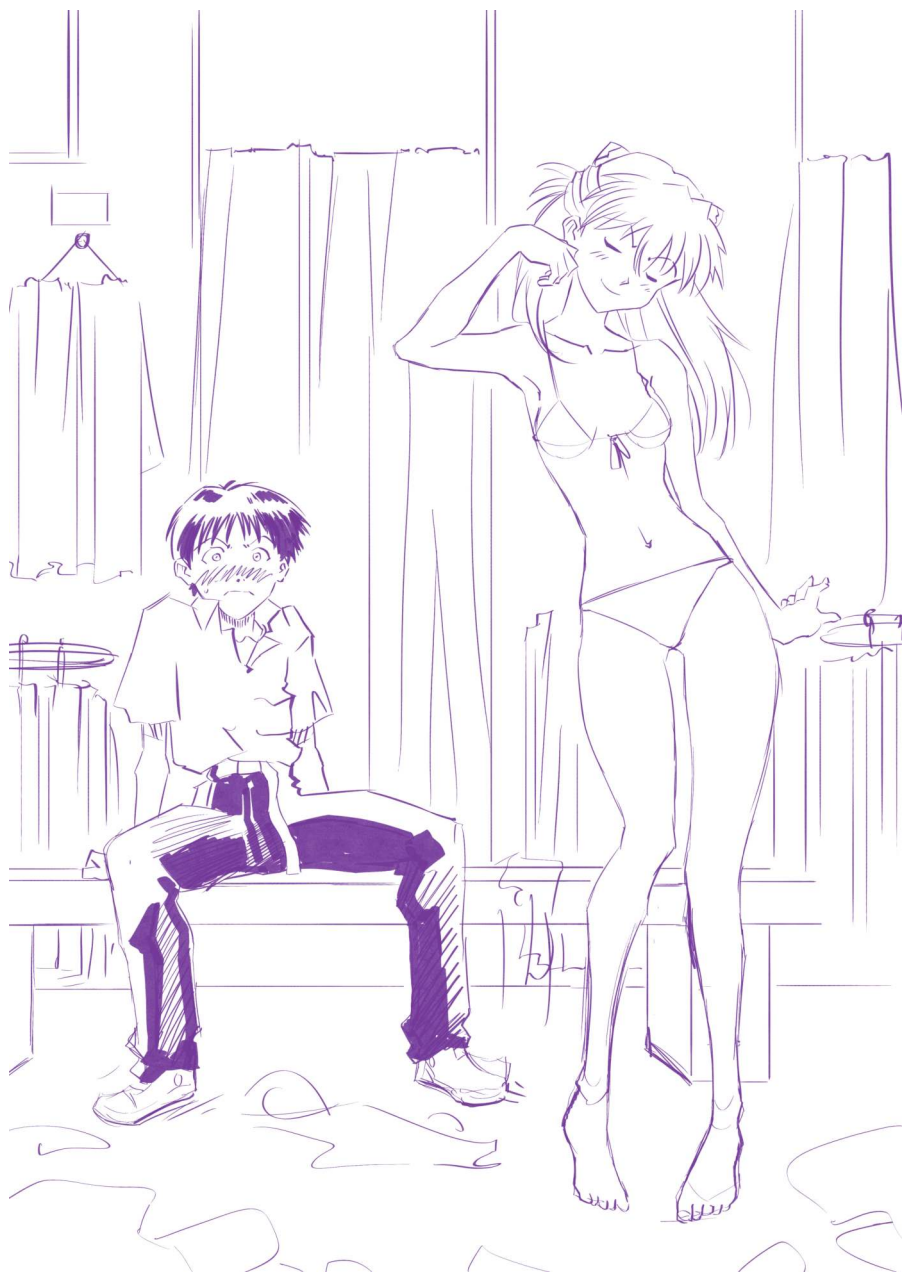


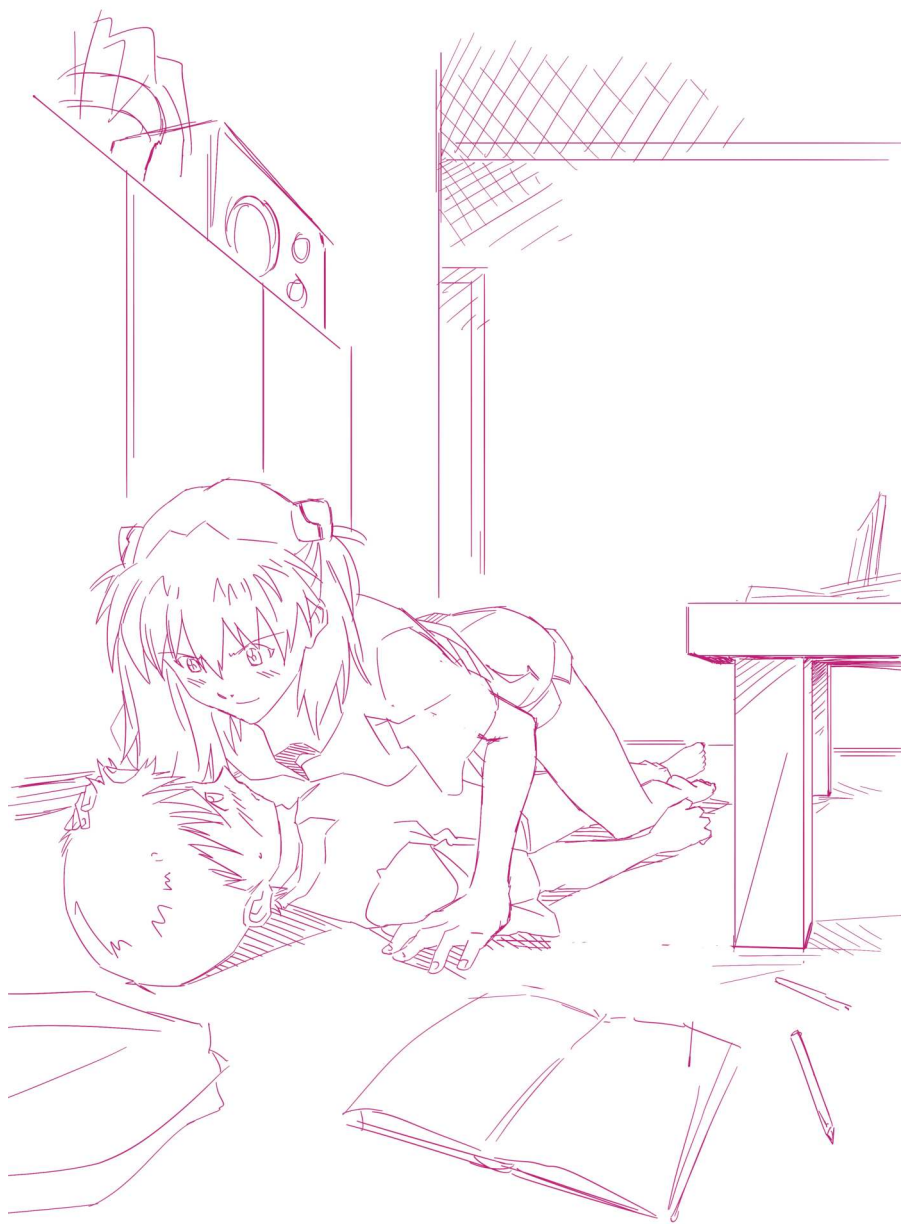


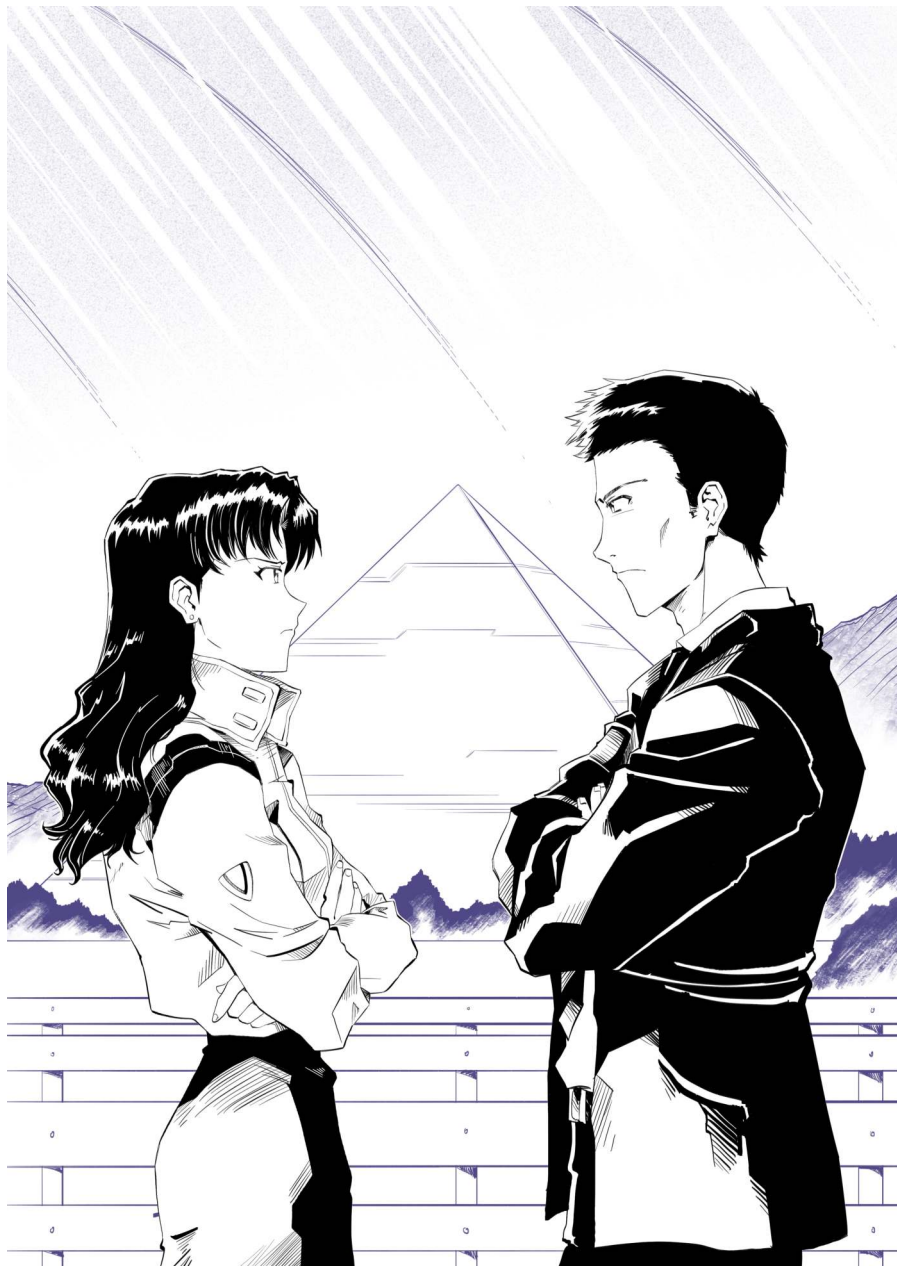
EXTRAS_002

UNUSED & WIP ILLUSTRATIONS



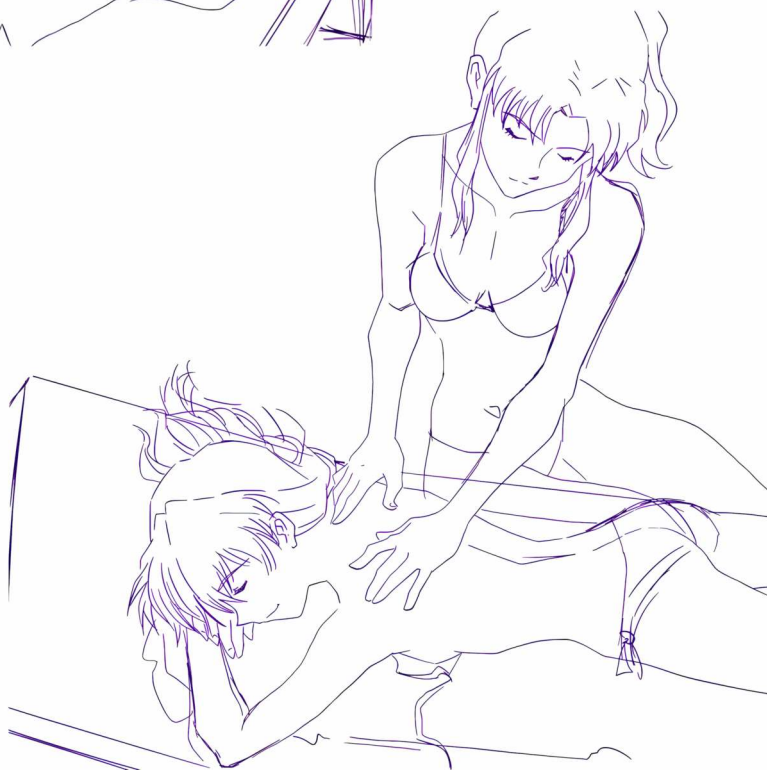


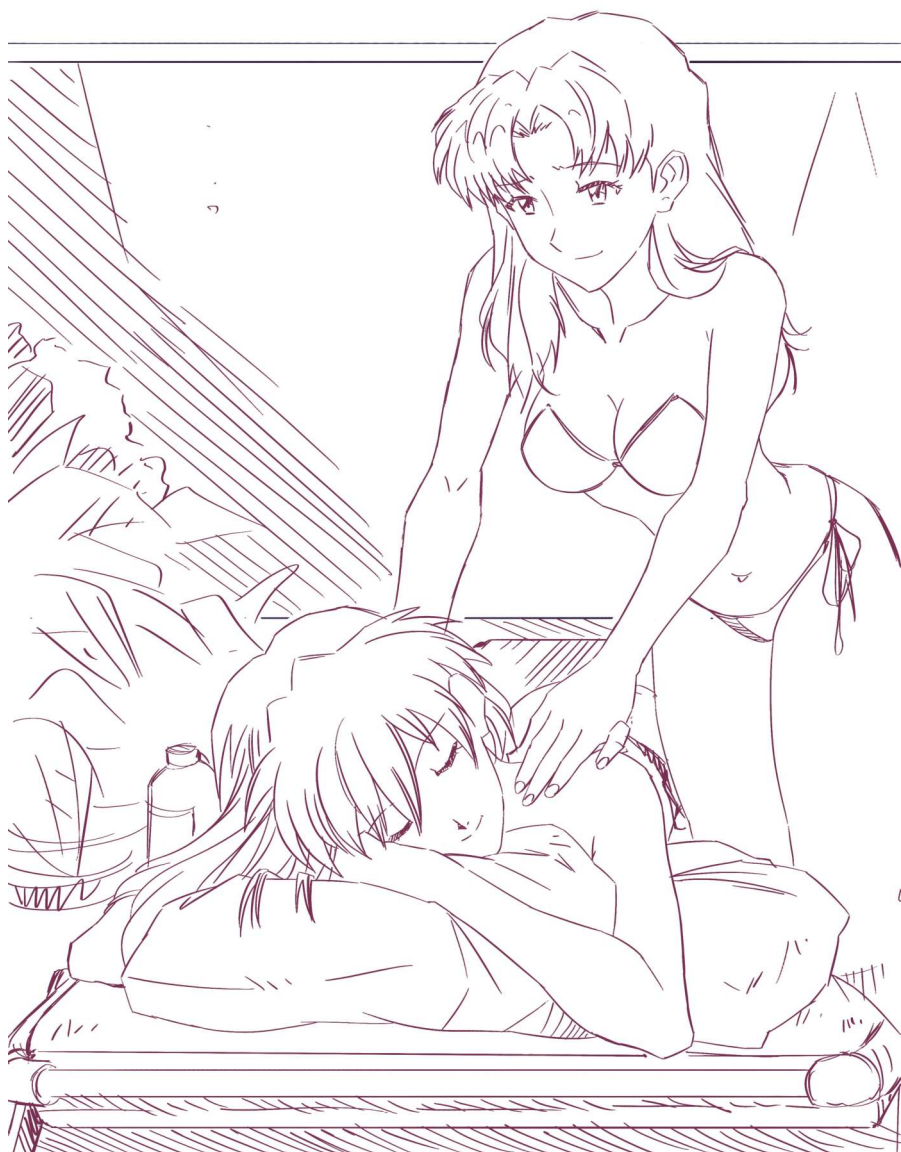














Rommel

NEON GENESIS

EVANGELION: GEM

PUBLISHING
STUDIO
3



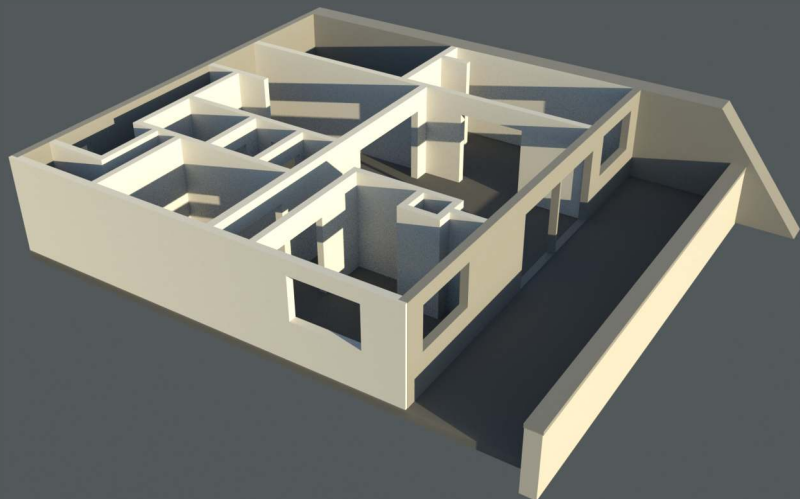
EXTRAS_003

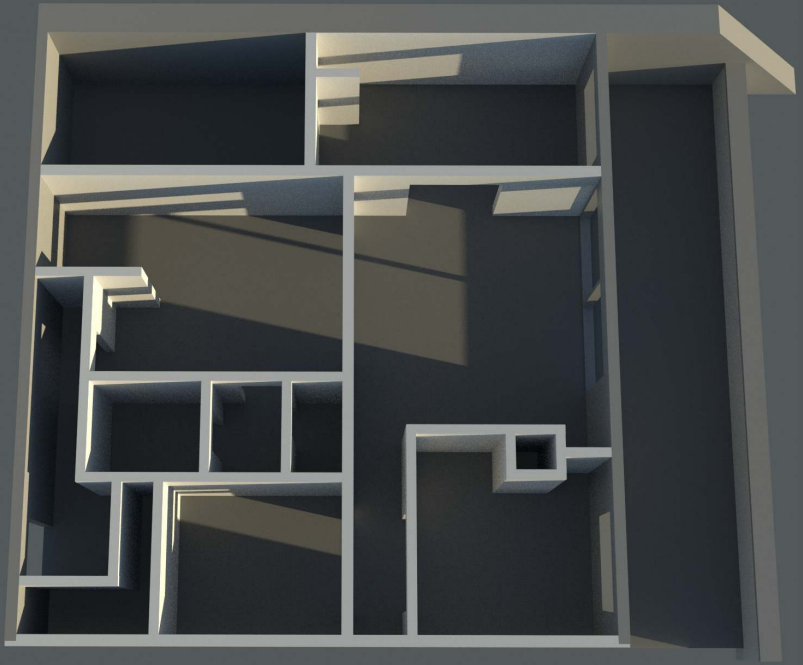
3D WORKS

Misato's apartment is the place of many scenes in Genocide: moments of relaxation, doubts, happiness, and anguish.

In order to faithfully recreate this familiar environment seen many times in the show and movies, we recreated the entire building and most of the interior in 3D.

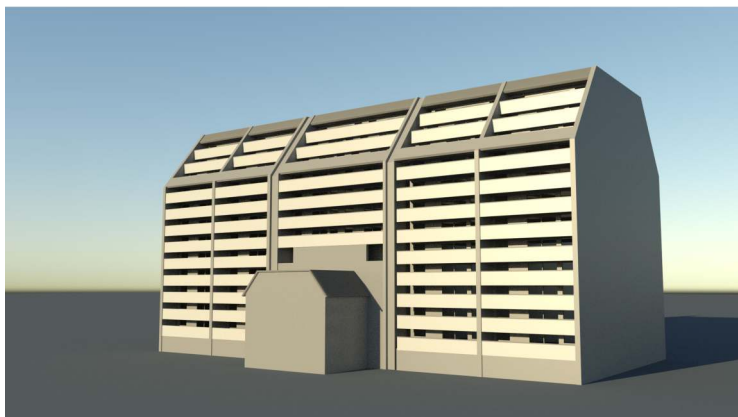
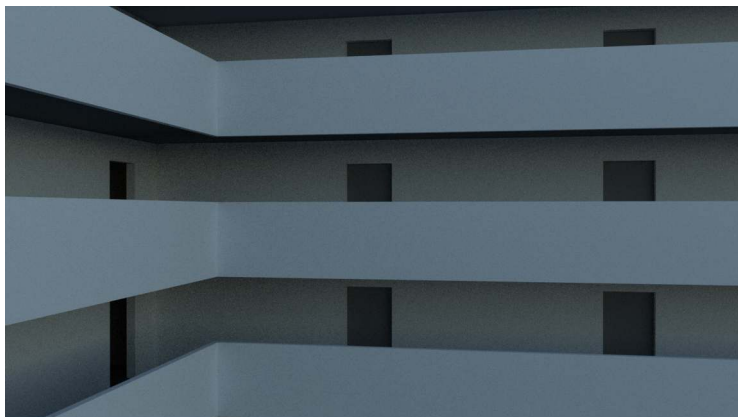
Here's a few views of what was completed.



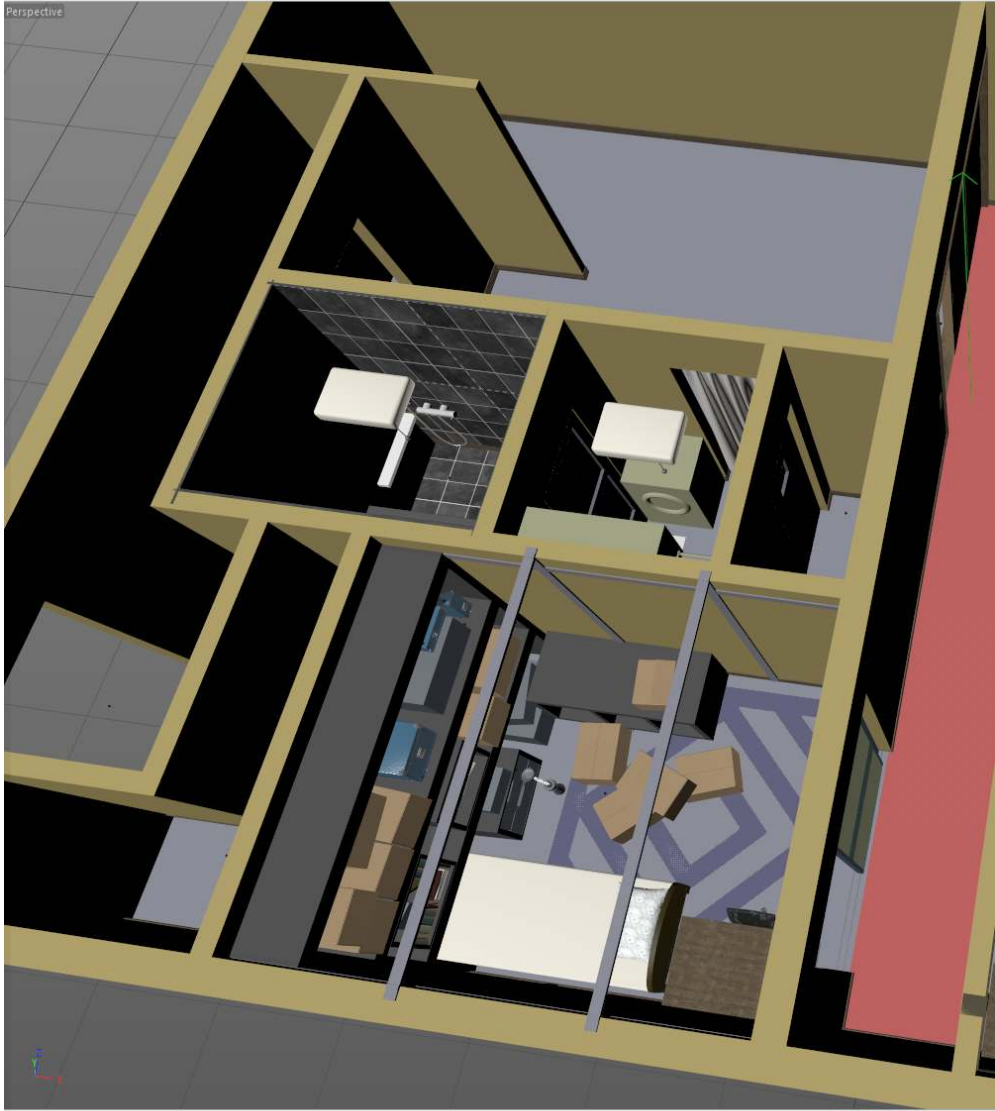


Frames from the original series (© Khara)





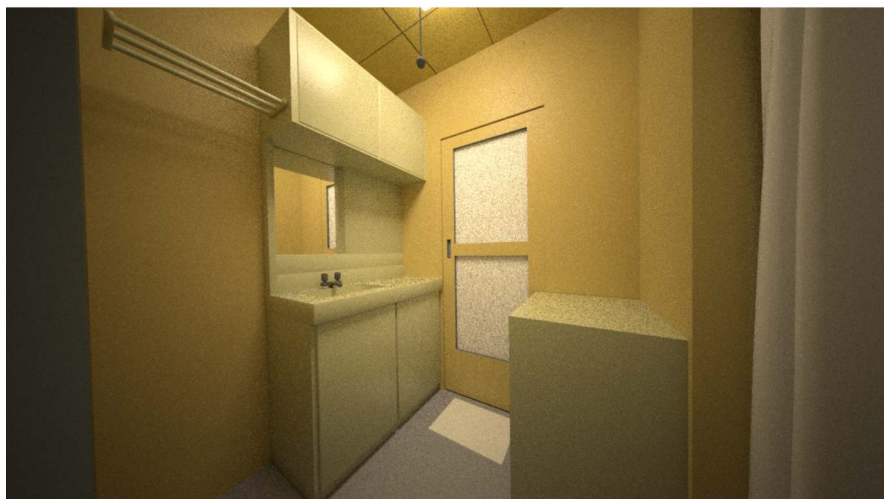
Perspective







Frames from the original series
© Khara





Background image from Girlfriend of Steel
© Khara / Gainax





Frames from the original series
© Khara

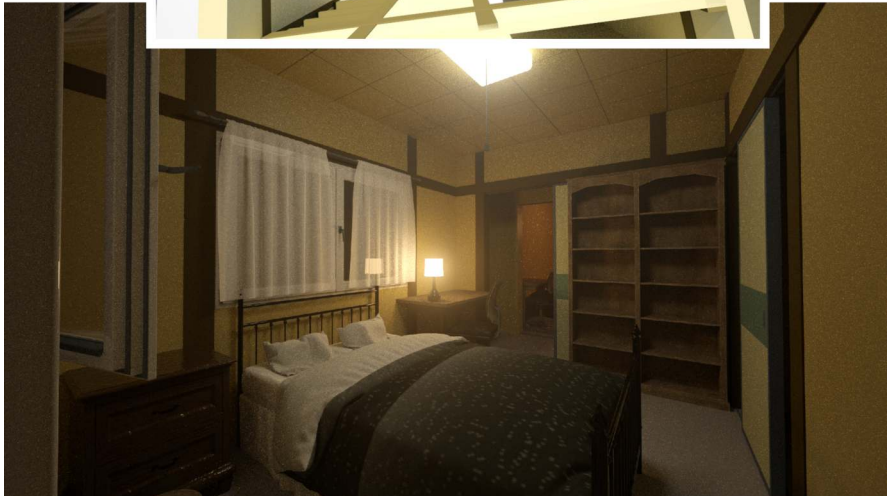


作品 SC +)16:9
110%

カチン熱い
月あつ
また見る

まだSG
ナラ、おれ
アツク
アツク
アツク

スタジオカラー
XOXO



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?

5

13 - Onus

14 - Experience



Story

Artworks

Design

Rommel

MRA-Artworks

Dako Chisay

Dr_Mint

PUBLISHING

STUDIO
3