Strategic Cyborg Evangelion

by Fraktal

Summary

There is a theory about the existence of an infinite number of universes, born out of infinite permutations of chance and choice. We all know about the universe where humanity battled the Angels - the natural against the unnatural. But where does natural end and where does unnatural begin? And just who is the unnatural to begin with?
"A man said once that the greatest stories are never told. This is not a fictional story but a historical account, written to ensure that future generations will be aware of what their ancestors went through. And considering the reverence some people show towards me, I decided it would be best if I wrote this personally; too many times throughout history did scholars exaggerate the acts and deeds of a great person, mangling the truth so far beyond recognition that future generations started doubting its authenticity. I have no illusions about being such a person; indeed, the reader shall find that I am just as flawed as everyone else… maybe even more so.

For people using this document for research – historians, librarians, scholars, whatever –, I tried to make my account as clear and truthful as I could. I lived a long life and there is no way to tell how much longer I will walk this mortal coil, but chances are that whoever is reading this will do so at a time when I’m gone. Thus, trying to lie or mislead the reader is completely pointless.

Even if the reader does not take any of this at face value, I only ask that you listen. I didn’t write this solely out of posterity. There were many errors and mistakes I made which could have been avoidable, errors and mistakes that came at a horrible cost. I have never been a man of religion and certain events I recorded here confirmed my belief that there are no deities worthy of worship in this universe, even as some of my fellow men started believing I should fill that spiritual vacuum – yet I still find myself praying that whoever is reading this will not repeat the same mistakes I made. Because if they do, there might not be anyone left to read their memoirs.

Believe me. As the greatest mass murderer in recorded human history, I know what I’m talking about.”

- The memoirs of Kaworu Nagisa, first recorded circa 2371 AD

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Low Earth orbit
~251,275,368 BC, exact date unknown

When the lone yellow star rose slowly from behind the planet that formerly obscured it, the light illuminated nothing but destruction.

For entropy is a force that cannot be denied. Over time, all will return to nothingness, whether naturally or by force. In this case, force was what shattered the once mighty hulls that floated in the silent void, the once golden-white metal now charred and blackened. Not one of them was untouched, for the enemy they once fought refused to be denied.

As the planet turned and light illuminated the darkness, it reflected off a billion objects. Long and slender vessels in the shape of enormous towers glided across the void, their numbers outshining the innumerable stars, the glint of bluish-gray on the metallic hulls declaring nothing but cold indifference for their fallen foes. To them, all will become one, or become nothing. Those who are worthy are absorbed; those who resist are purged. As it always has been, as it always will be.

For as the planet turned, a shape slowly emerged from the night. A long, slender bow of a spacecraft revealed itself, its half-circular cross-section widening steadily as kilometer after kilometer of golden-white hull plating inched out of the planet's shadow. A smaller secondary spire joined the main body underneath, still separated by several kilometers before the two joined together where the triangular hull ended to partially reveal a massive sphere inside the half-circular outer hull, the hole framed by two winglets at the sides, angled slightly downwards, with the titanic spacecraft finally ending in an
almost collar-like half-circle over its massive engines.

On the bottom of the titan, beneath the rim of the domed outer hull, hangar bays opened and smaller vessels swarmed out like hornets defending their nest. Except these "hornets" were still individually in the hundreds, some even in the thousands, of meters long themselves, hurriedly arranging themselves into a haphazard battle formation... even as the beings within knew it was pointless. There was nothing that could be done: their foes were just too many, a malevolent darkness creeping across the sky like a swarm of locusts, darkening the very galaxy itself with their numbers. No matter how many were destroyed, new ones took their place; no matter how many decades and centuries the war dragged on, they could do nothing but fall back against the advancing wall of doom that spanned thousands of lightyears in every direction. Now there was nothing left but the very world that had given them life – and the enemy was at their very doorstep.

At an unseen signal, the smaller vessels simultaneously opened fire. Yellow beams of ionized plasma and energetic particles crossed the void, gouging deep gashes into the gray vessels. The first line shattered immediately, metal plates melting and tearing, gleaming towers falling apart underneath the onslaught they were subjected to and adding their own wreckage to the debris already separating the two sides.

But the enemy refused to be denied. Enormous bolts of blue-hot plasma detached from the towerships, their searing payload hurtling across the void with deadly accuracy to hit their mark. Hexagonal energy fields flared into existence in their path, the bolts slamming against the sudden impediment before breaking through. This time the result was far more destructive: instead of penetrating the armor and wreaking havoc inside like their counterparts did, the plasma bolts simply melted through their entire target, exotic metal alloys failing to withstand the temperature and physically impossible nature of dark matter plasma.

Even as more tower-ships fell apart, more and more took the place of the fallen ones, the fleet mindlessly pushing onward despite their losses. Casualties were irrelevant; everything and everyone was completely expendable, with trillions more to replace them. They could take their losses; their prey could not.

Such was the face of inevitability.

The lone figure standing atop the titanic vessel knew that all too well. He knew this was the end. Their time had come and gone, never to return. As leader, it was his role to delay that fate for as long as he could, but averting it was beyond his power. No force in existence could do so. He knew the failure was not his; the conflict was lost the moment it began, the moment they attracted the attention of something infinitely their greater. Even so, he felt nothing but sorrow... yet he would fulfill the duty that was required of him.

The final duty of all warriors.

"Supreme Alpha, we cannot delay any longer. The system is almost completely surrounded and the spatial interference is approaching warp tolerance. We must go."

"Then go." – the warrior replied curtly. Nothing more needed to be said.

A ring of light formed behind him, framing his head and upper body as the warrior kicked off the vessel a moment before he ceased to be where he just was, the universe distorting around him as he rapidly accelerated to relativistic speeds that left the vessel behind in a split second before decelerating just as swiftly, coming to a standstill in the middle of the enemy fleet at an acceleration that would have killed any lifeform a million times over. With a single command from his mind, the red spear in his hand shifted, two edges becoming six as he brought the weapon to bear. A massive
torrent of light erupted from the hollow space enclosed by the weapon, lancing out towards the enemy with unstoppable force. As unrelenting as they were, even they could not stand against the might he unleashed upon them: with a slashing motion, the beam cut across the fleet, a thousand vessels perishing in a single blow before they even detected the incoming attack.

Reacting to this new threat, the vessels shifted their positions and unleashed their barrage upon the warrior even as he slashed outward with his weapon, several dozen energy beams erupting from the spear. His targets didn’t even try to evade before the deadly lances of light were upon them, each beam burrowing through a separate vessel before emerging on the other side and seeking a new target even as the previous one erupted into a blinding white firestorm as the reactor core within failed, the entire vessel crumbling into itself like a giant sinkhole as the very fabric of space itself shook and struggled to remain contiguous. With the innumerable vessels all imploding at once, what remained was a weak and tenuous curtain between the physical universe and what laid beyond, forever weakened and strained – yet it would not be until eons later that anyone would feel the effects.

But not all of them had him in their sights. He saw great plasma bolts impacting the planet, each flash extinguishing millions of lives. Sorrow rose even higher within the warrior, even though he knew all along what would transpire no matter his actions. His task was merely to distract the great enemy – and so he did, leaping into battle with the might that had come to be known of him. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions fell before him... yet his strength wasn’t infinite, unlike the ranks of his enemies.

Just before his end came, the warrior saw the titanic vessel, surrounded by a sphere of hexagons blazing like a star in their strain to hold back the sheer firepower directed at them, some of them failing altogether, vanish as a swift yet immense ripple consumed it, spiriting it through space and time to somewhere their enemy could no longer follow... and he knew their fate was out of his hands now.

Then a blinding brilliance covered the battlefield. Even the local star’s light disappeared before it, the gray vessels pausing at the unexpected phenomenon. Their indecisiveness only lasted for a split second before they could think no more: vessels and debris alike became dust, dust became nothingness. In his broken armor, the warrior’s still body dissolved into liquid, a tiny red light emerging from his mortal shell to join many others in answer to a calling that promised life anew.

Eventually the brilliance faded, leaving only a silent void and a two-pronged red spear drifting slowly towards the now uninhabited world. As the world turned and day became night, the only source of light below was the dull crimson of magma breaking through the crust in the most heavily bombarded region, the ash in its wake plunging the formerly blue world into a million years of darkness.

[Screen caption – main title: 大量破壊実体エヴァンゲリオン]

Tokyo-2, Inner District 5
September 25, 2041

The hapless pedestrian barely managed to step out of the way of the teenage boy of around 14 years of age swearing under his breath, sprinting past without breaking his stride. – "Sorry!" – the boy called behind himself before turning his attention back to the front. 'Why NOW, of all times?!

Kaworu Nagisa was not having a good day. To him, it seemed like an eternity – but the truth is that it was only a week ago that his life was completely overturned.
Until a week ago, he was enjoying (to a certain measure) the life he had always known: the life of a teenager living by himself in a condemned building in downtown Vienna dating back to the 1970s, with no heating, running water or even electricity other than what he could get from illegally tapping into another building’s network. Technically, he was a homeless squatter – but as no one ever bothered to evict him, he just showed himself in and all was fine. Besides, what choice did he have? Roam the streets until he froze to death in the next –30°C winter storm? Get eaten by a random specimen of the various xenofauna that roamed Earth since Second Impact? Kaworu was perfectly fine with his current living arrangements, thank you very much.

That is, until a certain altercation with the son of his school’s principal ended up getting him expelled from high school, barely two weeks after he began high school. That in itself was already a bad thing and for any other teenager, a source of much yelling and scolding from one’s parents. Not for him, though. If there was any advantage to being a street kid without known parents, it was the lack of getting yelled at by an adult.

With that said, no parents also meant no one to wake him up in time for school if his homemade alarm clock suddenly died during the night. Especially while his internal clock still hadn’t completely readjusted to having been sent halfway across the world. Having only turned 14 this month, education was still compulsory for him and his expulsion naturally attracted attention from the authorities. Kaworu, naturally, knew that he was going to be sent to another school instead and that is precisely what happened... but what could’ve possibly caused said authorities to send an Austrian teenager to Japan, of all places, was beyond him.

Or rather, he had a good guess that it had something to do with his Japanese name. For the simple reason that nothing else came to mind.

And so here he was, running down the street of a Japanese city built from scratch after the Great Revolution of 2018, touted as a shining jewel of human perseverance alongside White Forest City... and he was late for school, right on his first day. At least, he thought he was late. Not having a watch or any idea how long it would take him to walk to school from his new home, he decided to depart early, just to be safe. As luck would have it though, that damn alarm clock died again and he almost overslept.

Bad luck wasn’t the only kind of luck he had that day, however, as he rounded another corner to see the school’s gates barely a hundred meters ahead of him. Letting out a sigh of relief, he slowed to normal walking speed and started rummaging through his bag, finally pulling out a slightly crumpled sheet of paper just as he reached the gate.

He almost didn’t notice the rising sound of an electric engine until the black sports bike shot past him and through the gate, passing so close to him that his shirt was ruffled by the wind. The students who got inside before him immediately scattered in every direction to make way, most of them voicing varying degrees of surprise and/or indignation. None of that really mattered to the biker, though, who deftly steered the vehicle into an empty parking slot and came to a stop, the engine going silent the instant the bike stopped.

The scattered youth made annoyed grumbling, several sending glares towards the driver before filing into the building, as if they were already used to this situation. Well, most of them: the twintailed girl storming out and immediately heading to the biker with a none-too-pleased expression looked anything but content. – “碇さん、それが危険だった!” – she erupted.

Only now did he notice that the biker was anything but usual: the thigh-length black synthetic leather coat, the shades that likely substituted for biker goggles and an unruly mop of blue hair, of all things, did not conceal whatsoever the clearly feminine features of a teenage girl.
That... was most definitely how the girls in his old hometown dressed. Not even close. If anything, she looked more like a mafioso or something.

"どのような無謀な運転はそれでしたか?" – Twintails continued in rapid-fired... he guessed it was Japanese. – "君が誰かを傷つけるてきた!"

"しませんでした。" – the other girl replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

"私は何が起こったのか見た！" – Twintails pointed a thumb towards Kaworu. – "君がはほとんど彼を傷つける！"

"彼は負傷していない。"

"それは関係ないのです！もっと注意してください！" – With that, the twintailed girl turned away from the biker and went straight for Kaworu. Behind her, the biker girl just walked away without a care for the world. – "ごめんな、渚くん。気にしないでください、碇さんはいつもそうです。" – the twintailed girl said, this time to him.

Kaworu scratched the back of his head uncertainly. – "Um... I can't speak Japanese. Sorry."

"That's quite alright." – the girl replied in fluent but ever so slightly accented English. – "Nagisa-kun, right?"

"How did you know?"

"The principal told me you were coming. I'm here to fetch you. I'm Hikari Horaki. We're going to be classmates, in room 2-1... but you probably don't know where it is, which is why I was waiting for you here."

"Ah, yeah, I had some, uh... technical difficulties. Almost overslept. Sorry."

"It's alright. This way."

True enough, she led him into the building, down a set of corridors and upstairs. Kaworu was used to being surrounded by people of his age group but wherever the two of them passed now, everyone just stopped and stared at him as if he was some kind of curiosity. Even with all the mixing of ethnicities after Second Impact, Japan's population was mostly native, with the usual Asian features and dark hair.

With his pale skin, ash-gray hair and crimson eyes, Kaworu was sticking out like a sore thumb and he knew it.

Evidently Hikari noticed it as well, if her slowing down to let him follow her closer was any indication. – "Sorry about the staring."

Kaworu shrugged. – "It's probably my hair. I've gotten used to it."

"I've been meaning to ask, if you don't mind..." – she said after a momentary pause. – "Why did you dye your hair?"

"I didn't dye. This is my natural hair color."

"Really?"

He nodded, even though he knew she couldn't see him. – "Yeah. I don't know why, it's always been like this. My eyes, too."
"Are you, um... an albino?"

Kaworu shrugged again. – "I don't really know. Never bothered to ask a doctor."

They walked in silence for another minute.

"Why did you transfer here, if I may ask?" – she asked eventually.

"It wasn't by choice, actually. I got into a fight that didn't end well for the other guy."

Hikari paused in her step and turned to face him. – "What do you mean?"

"He and his gorillas were harassing a younger kid and I told them to cut it out, so they came at me instead." – He shrugged. – "I fought back."

"...and?" – she probed.

"Like I said, it didn't end well for them and the principal didn't appreciate his son ending up in the hospital with a broken cheekbone."

The girl immediately lost her cool at that. – "You picked a fight with your principal's son?!" – she all but shrieked, attracting the attention of everyone in earshot.

"I didn't!" – Kaworu denied, defensive at her sudden outburst. – "I just told you, I told them to leave that kid alone and they attacked me! I only fought back."

Which was the exact, literal truth.

Hikari just stared at him for a few moments before skeptically asking – "And why exactly did you step in, then?"

"What was I supposed to do, let them beat him up instead?" – He let out a sigh before adding – "Anyway, nobody listened to my side of the story, so... I'm here."

Again, she stared with a probing glare before turning away from him and resuming her journey, Kaworu falling in behind her. – "No offense, but I honestly hope you don't intend to make a repeat performance here." – she eventually said.

"Not if I can help it." – he replied.

They eventually arrived to a classroom. Right outside the door though, Hikari paused and held him up. – "Seriously, no fighting. Please." – she said quietly.

Kaworu smiled. – "Don't worry. I'm not the troublemaker type." – he assured.

Hikari's expression seemed to lighten up at that, which was one less weight on his shoulder. On the other hand, it was immediately replaced with another; for the moment they entered the classroom, the entire class collectively turned to stare at him. As if the staring outside wasn't enough already.

Kaworu never really felt comfortable at being the center of attention for so many people at once.

Even if that attention came in varying flavors. Case in point, the girl at the second desk of the doorside row: brown hair with hairband and twintails ("What is it with twintails?" he wondered), glasses and a very generous chest, eyes running over him like those of a predator savoring a particularly delicious prey.
She was clearly and openly checking him out – and judging from her approving smirk, her impression was positive. – "Lookin' good there, stranger!" – she called out, flashing a thumbs-up at him.

"Mari!" – Hikari reprimanded the other girl. – "Cut it out!"

"Already staking your claim, Kari? That's bold."

"I said cut it out!" – Hikari repeated before turning her attention towards the class. – "Everyone listen up!" – she called out in a tone that was definitely unlike the polite and friendly behavior Kaworu had seen from her so far. Before he could ask her to not bother with an announcement, she thumbed towards him. – "Starting now, he'll be in our class. No heckling him, understood?"

"What's up with that hair?" – someone called from the rear of the class.

Kaworu sighed. – "For the second time today, it's not dye." – 'Not like I could afford it in the first place.' he silently added. – "This is my real hair color."

"Yeah, right."

"Yamada! You mind shuttin' up?" – a boy in a tracksuit called back. – "New kid just got here and you're already making an ass of yourself."

Kaworu thought he could see a faint smile flash across Hikari's face at that before she snapped back into 'class rep mode'. – "Suzuhara! Watch your language! And Yamada, I just said no heckling!"

"Hey, I just asked a question! How is that heckling?"

Without bothering to answer, Hikari turned back to Kaworu. – "So, um... you'll sit in front of Suzuhara."

Kaworu nodded. – "Okay. Thanks for everything."

She smiled at that. – "Don't mention it. It's my duty as class representative." – With that, she walked to her own desk right next to the door, the busty girl behind her immediately leaning forward to get her attention, the move emphasizing her chest to such an extent that Kaworu idly wondered if she was doing it on purpose.

Not that it mattered much, in the end. As the girls in his previous school (well, schools now) learned, Kaworu Nagisa was not easily influenced with flirting. Or influenced at all.

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A warning to new readers. This story is technically a crossover, yet I'm posting it here instead of in the crossover section because the other half is obscure enough that no one would find the story otherwise. With that said, prior knowledge of the other half is not needed to understand the plot and references; all necessary context and background information will be provided in end-of-chapter author's notes.

This is also going to be a VERY long story. I don't know the current length but it will probably be somewhere between 200k-300k words. Hell, it might even hit 400k words. I'm not writing it long just for length's sake; that's how many it will take to write down the whole plot without leaving anything out.

Explanation on the title: the 'Strategic' part is not meant as in 'something to do with strategy' but
meant as in 'strategic weapon of mass destruction'. Thus the kanji in the title, tairyō-hakai jittai, literally meaning 'entity of mass destruction' (Japanese has no word for 'cyborg' but instead transcribes the English pronunciation into katakana) – which I believe is an apt description of an Eva’s combat effectiveness against conventional forces.

Regarding the unsubtitled dialogue in this chapter: I do not use translation convention. That is, non-English dialogue will not be translated or subtitled (and in the case of Japanese dialogue, not romanized), if rendered in writing at all. Assume everyone speaks English unless stated otherwise. The reason for this is that there is no non-English language the entire cast speaks without exception; Kaworu in particular doesn't speak Japanese here, so he realistically wouldn't understand Hikari's outburst. Of course, if this story would be an anime, English dialogue would be in Japanese as well. With that said, I'm not going to toss around random Japanese and German phrases just for the hell of it either, for the simple reason that I don't speak either and thus the more (and more complex) I use, the more likely I'll screw up and make myself look like an idiot. Only when it makes narrative sense will a character use a foreign language.
Chapter 2

Tokyo-2, Inner District 5
September 25, 2041

As soon as the class was dismissed for recess, Kaworu felt a tapping on his shoulder, asking for his attention.

"So, new guy." – the boy sitting behind him remarked. – "Tōji Suzuhara. Fancy seeing you being here three weeks late. Warp lag?"

"Kaworu Nagisa and I'm local. Never even left Earth before."

"Most of us are like that. Me too. Not all, though." – He thumbed towards a group of boys at the rear of the classroom. – "That asshole who asked about your hair, Yamada? His family moved to Earth this summer."

"Don't forget the part that you used to know him." – the glasses-wearing boy called ahead from behind Toji, without raising his eyes from his tablet.

"Ah, that. Yeah, him and I went to the same kindergarten but he moved to the Nereid system before school. His old man's a pilot."

"Military?" – Kaworu asked.

Tōji shook his head. – "Nah, civilian. Still the crappiest job ever, if you ask me. I mean, you only get to go home once per month? That sucks."

"Yep."

"Anyway, how 'bout you? Where did you transfer in from?"

"Vienna."

A short silence ensued before Tōji sheepishly asked – "Uh... where is that?"

A sigh came from Glasses. – "It's in Europe, Tōji. What are you going to geography class for?"

Tōji whirled around in his chair. – "Oi! Are you calling me stupid?!"

"Yep."

As the larger boy proceeded to give a piece of his mind to Glasses, Kaworu cracked a small smile. It could've been worse, he supposed. All his life, he lived in the same building and went to the same school with the same classmates. He was well and truly a fish out of water now and had no idea what to expect. Fortunately however, this place was head and shoulders better than his old neighborhood: both cleaner and friendlier.

Well, except for the trio of upperclassmen crowded around a short geek-looking boy, evidently a fellow freshman, under the tree in front of the classroom's window. Kaworu's eyes immediately locked onto the three, watching them intently.

Then one of the upperclassmen lashed out and shoved the geek onto the ground, the others laughing in amusement.
The air around Kaworu suddenly became colder than Siberian ice. Even the other boys noticed it, Tōji cut himself off at the same instant as Glasses looked up to see the gray-haired teen abruptly push his chair back and stand up. – "Excuse me." – he said quietly before walking out of the classroom.

Tōji just stared after him in surprise. – "What's with him?"

"No idea."

Outside, the geek landed on his rear again as the upperclassmen practically doubled over in laughter. – "Man, you're pathetic!" – one of them jeered.

That was when they heard someone loudly clearing his throat behind them.

"What do you guys think you're doing?" – Kaworu asked in a cold but calm voice, arms folded and eyes narrowed.

"None of your business, freak. Now scram!"

"I asked a question." – Kaworu stated, still calm.

"And I said get lost!"

Kaworu motioned with his head towards the geek, who was still sitting on the ground. – "Not until you leave him alone."

"What, are you some kind of white knight wannabe? You seriously need to work on your costume, Snow White."

The ash-haired youth didn't even twitch at the insult.

The situation, however, ended up resolved by an unlikely party. – "KAWORU NAGISA!"

Five heads simultaneously snapped to the source of the voice: Hikari leaning out of the classroom's window.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!" – the girl roared at the top of her lungs, the entire class lined up at the windows to watch. – "ARE YOU TRYING TO GET EXPELLED FOR FIGHTING AGAIN?"

The bullies immediately turned a shade paler. – "What was that...?" – the one who insulted Kaworu asked, his voice suddenly lacking conviction.

"You're not the first ones I had to correct." – Kaworu remarked, slightly tilting his head to the side. – "So, what'll it be?"

The two parties stood, three pairs of eyes of various colors staring down a single pair of blood red.

Finally the leader of the bullies spoke up. – "Let's go." – With that, the three departed.

The second they were out of sight, Kaworu immediately went to their former victim and extended his hand in a silent offer. – "You alright?"

"You alright?"

"Y-yeah..." – the smaller boy stuttered. – "T-thanks..."
Kaworu flashed a friendly smile, his former coldness vanishing without a trace. – "Glad to help. If they ever bother you again, let me know."

Hikari was already waiting for him at the classroom's threshold. – "I know this is only your first day and I don't have anything against you but if you pick a fight, I will be the first one to call a teacher. So behave!"

"I know." – he replied, walking past her without stopping. A moment later, he casually raised a hand and added – "Thanks for the interruption, by the way." –, again without looking at her.

"I didn't do it to help you." – she called after him.

"But it still helped me out. If they back off without incident, all the better. Nobody getting hurt is always good." – With that he walked to his desk, uncomfortably aware that half of the class was staring at his back, the other half whispering between themselves while sending occasional glances at him.

"Man... what the hell was that?" – Tōji murmured as he watched the other boy drop himself onto his chair.

"Me doing something that bit me in the ass last time." – Kaworu replied, releasing a strained sigh as he stretched. – "Minus broken bones and one hospitalized prick this time. I don't suppose you've seen anyone else harassing someone?"

Tōji raised his hands defensively. – "Hey, I don't even know most people in the school! I only moved here in sixth grade." – He steepled his fingers behind his head and leaned backwards until the backrest of his chair bumped against the edge of Kensuke's desk. – "It wasn't exactly yesterday but you could say I know what it feels like to be the new guy."

"Is that why you approached me?"

"Kinda, plus you seemed like an okay guy." – Tōji thumbed towards outside. – "What was that about, anyway? You know that kid?"

"Never met him before."

"Then why did you help him out?"

"Did you see anyone else rushing to help him?"

"Nah."

Kaworu lazily made a 'there you go' gesture. – "That's exactly why."

"...I don't get it."

"Do you have anyone you care about? Younger sibling or such?"

"I have a sister."

"If she would've been in that guy's place, what would you do?"

"What kind of question is that? I'd bust their faces in, class rep or no class rep." – Tōji made a horizontal slashing motion with his palm. – "Nobody messes with my sister."
"So you'd help her out against anyone who picks on her just because she's weaker?"

"Damn straight."

Kaworu pointed outside, at the spot where the confrontation took place. – "And who does that guy have to help him out? Does he even have anyone? If he has no one to turn to, who's going to help him? Does he deserve to get bullied because he can't defend himself?" – At Tōji's silence, he added – "And that is why I stepped in."

Even by the time the teacher returned, Tōji still had no answer.

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Later that day

"...so that's how I met the class rep. And I tell you, she's been riding my ass ever since."

"She's got a problem with you?"

Tōji shrugged. – "I honestly have no idea. I think she just enjoys picking on me."

"Or maybe she just wants your attention?" – Kaworu pointed out. – "Maybe she likes you."

"That I can't see happening. But if she really did like me, wouldn't she say so? You know, like leaving a love letter at my stuff when I'm not there or something?"

"I don't know."

"How would you ask a girl out?"

"I wouldn't; not interested in relationships. Maybe in a few years."

"...are you pulling my leg?"

"No."

"You seriously mean to tell me you don't care about women?!" – Tōji asked incredulously.

"Yep."

"Shit, don't tell me you're gay or something!"

"Of course I'm not."

Before moving to Japan, Kaworu usually went home by his lonesome. While he knew pretty much everyone in his old neighborhood, he never asked any of them to accompany him home, by virtue of not considering them good enough friends to do so. As he was about to leave school at the end of the day however, Tōji called after him to ask where he lived; upon hearing the answer, the boy immediately offered for the two of them to go together for part of the journey, reasoning that he himself lived in a similar direction. Thus there they were, chatting about simple things while walking home together.

That was before he felt the tap on his shoulder, his ears registering footsteps from multiple people behind him just a moment too late.

He started to ask – "Wha-" – as he turned around but didn't get to finish before he rudely got interrupted by the fist impacting his face with full force.
It wasn't anywhere near debilitating but he still got dazed for a second there. Distantly he heard Tōji yell - "What the hell is your problem?!!" - before his brain registered the three teens in front of him.

He recognized them as the bullies from this morning.

"You didn't honestly think we'd just leave things at that, did you?" – the one who hit him, obviously their leader, asked.

"Who do you think you are to just show up and think you can push us around?" – another demanded.

"There aren't any girls around to save you now." – the third quipped. – "Your luck just ran out, punk."

Tōji immediately interposed himself between Kaworu and his attackers. – "So you thought you'd go after him outside school? Gutless cowards!"

In response, the upperclassmen just shoved him aside. – "Do yourself a favor and fuck off before you get some too, brat." – the third bully said as they advanced on Kaworu.

Tōji was on the verge of charging the trio when he was interrupted by the very person he was trying to shield.

"Suzuhara." – Kaworu wiped the blood from his lips before looking up, his bangs making way to reveal a glare that made Tōji unconsciously take a step back. – "I got this."

Then he leaned forward and leaped.

And not just launched himself into a run; he crossed the three meter distance between himself and the bullies in a single bound. The leader of the bullies didn't even have time to cry out in surprise before Kaworu returned the favor from a minute ago with a jaw-loosening right hook, literally launching the upperclassman airborne for a moment before he fell onto his back.

Kaworu immediately felt a pair of arms grabbing him from behind, trying to restrain him while the third bully advanced from ahead. Said bully quickly found out the hard way his victim's legs weren't restrained when the scuffed nose of Kaworu's shoe firmly embedded itself into his groin. As the boy stumbled back with a pained scream, the gray-haired teen drove his elbow into his captor's ribs to get loose before delivering a powerful backhand to disorient the bully, followed by grabbing him by the shoulder and brutally kneeing him in the stomach once, twice, three times.

With the third one whimpering on the ground clutching his groin in obvious agony, Kaworu smoothed his shirt out and started slowly advancing towards the leader of the bullies, even as he heard the second one messily and violently throw up onto the curb behind him.

"Three out of three." – Kaworu remarked casually. – "I win with a hat-trick."

"Wha... what the hell are you...?!

"Have you guys ever been to a street brawl where the other guy's got a knife?" – He casually pulled up his sleeve, revealing an almost invisible scar running down his forearm. – "I have." – He let his sleeve fall back and cover his arm again. – "Several times. You harass kids who can't even fight back; I went up against people who could've killed me if they wanted to and walked away from it on my own feet. So you made a big mistake assuming I'd be afraid if the three of you ganged up on me after school."
That was something the bullies' leader seemed to have realized himself, if his terrified face was any indication.

Kaworu slowly walked up to the bully. The boy tried to scramble away on all fours but didn't make it even a single meter away before Kaworu yanked him back by his hair. – "Listen up. I don't know who do you think you are, nor do I really care. But if you really want to know who I arm, I'm more than happy to help you with that. I'm Kaworu Nagisa, a guy who happens to take issue with assholes picking on someone not their own size. You pick on them – any of them –, you pick on me. I don't give a damn about your excuses but I'm not going to stand for this dick-weaving dominance bullshit. Got it?" – He gave the bully's hair a tug to emphasize his point. – "If I ever catch you harassing someone again, I will pummel you again and I will keep pummeling you until you get it into your thick skull that this shit is not cool. And don't even think about doing it behind my back because I will know. I don't care if you hate my guts – but if you have a problem with me, take it out on me personally."

The bully only hissed and gasped in pain from his hair being pulled.

"Did you understand what I said?" – Kaworu asked, giving his hair another yank.

"Y-yes! Yes!" – the bully cried.

Without warning, Kaworu unceremoniously dropped him to the ground. – "Get out of my sight."

He turned his head to the other two, who were only starting to pick themselves off the ground. – "All of you. I don't want to see your faces ever again."

The bullies didn't need to be told twice. While their leader was only sporting a bruise on his face, the others were considerably worse off, with the second one needing the others' help to get off the ground and the third one still looking nauseous and visibly wincing when he leaned down to help his friend up.

Once he confirmed his attackers were indeed retreating, Kaworu turned to a wide-eyed and slack-jawed Tōji and simply said – "Let's go."

They walked in complete silence for several minutes, until Tōji suddenly heard Kaworu mutter – "Damn it..."

"What?"

"I thought I left that crap behind me but it's the same over here. It's everywhere. I'm sick of this."

"Why didn't you want me to help?"

"You'd have gotten hurt. Besides, I told you I can take care of it myself... and I did."

Tōji shook his head in amazement. – "Man, that was awesome. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

Kaworu just made a dismissive gesture. – "Here and there. Scuffles with other kids. Street brawls. That one time when I kicked a wannabe burglar out of my place."

"Thing is, the whole class saw you step up to them and if they go to school tomorrow, everyone will see they got their asses kicked."

"All the better."
"What if they tell on you?" – Tōji argued.

"They can try, but you said it yourself: there are witnesses." – Kaworu pointed out. – "You yourself saw what happened, so your word is against theirs. They can't tell on me without everyone finding out what they did and if that happens, those guys are going to lose everyone's respect and I'm pretty sure they don't want that. If all else fails, the kid I helped out might testify if I asked. Favor for a favor."

"...I didn't think of that."

Kaworu just shrugged. – "Piece of advice from the streets: if everybody hates your guts, you might as well be dead already. A little compassion can take you a long way."

Tōji just stared at his companion for several seconds before shaking his head in disbelief. – "Man... are you going to be a politician or something?"

"Hell no!" – Kaworu protested, animatedly crossing his forearms in front of himself into an X shape. – "No way! I'd be a horrible choice for bossing anyone around. I don't have the mindset for it."

"What mindset?"

"Look at that guy I helped today. If I help him, he'd eventually learn to protect himself. But that's never going to happen if I keep hanging around his head all the time. It would defeat the whole purpose if he would never need to learn how to protect himself." – He pointed at the sky. – "If the sun shines on you in space, you'll die, right? That's why there's the ozone layer: to shield you from the worst of it. You still tan but you won't get sunburn. But if you go underground so that the sun doesn't reach you at all, your skin can't make that stuff that makes your bones strong, I forgot its name. You go weak and might even die."

"How does that come into leadership?"

"Let me put it this way. I'm more comfortable with pushing from below than pulling from above. Besides, politicians are self-interested pricks who think they're more important than they actually are. Do you take me for that kind of a person?"

"No."

"Thanks. I'm not helping others to get anything out of it; I just do it because I want to. What's wrong with that?"

"...nothing, I guess," – Tōji finally admitted, just as the two reached an intersection. – "Well... guess this is where we part ways. Unless you'd feel safer if I stayed?"

"No, I'll be fine. But thanks for the offer anyway."

"I just hope those idiots won't try and have another go at you again."

"If they try again despite what they got last time, that just proves how stupid they are."

"You got that right, mate!" – Tōji replied with a grin. – "See ya tomorrow."

With that, the two teens parted, Tōji taking a right turn while Kaworu crossed the street to keep going the same way.

He barely got half a block away from the intersection before Kaworu inexplicably felt a faint tingling
sensation in his head. Shaking his head to clear it, the sensation disappeared as quickly as it came, so he just forgot about it and moved on.

If he would've turned around, he would've immediately spotted the black-coated figure perched atop the concrete fencepost he just passed. The girl's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly as she silently observed him from her vantage point, just before a truck passed by her.

By the time the vehicle moved past the fencepost, she wasn't there anymore.

There were many personalities I went through while planning Kaworu's character; inspirations ranged from Kamina, to Kamijō Tōma, to ADOLF HITLER (yep, I am being serious). Then I realized: I don't actually need to alter his personality all that much, as he already has what I wanted. He's mostly the same Kaworu the readers know, with minor alterations. First, he spent his entire life among humans, so his mannerisms and thought patterns are completely human; no cryptic references or odd behavior are to be expected. Second, he grew up on his own and learned to look out for himself, so he's got a healthy dose of streetwise thinking.

Essentially, he's an ordinary teen version of Kaworu. As ordinary as he can get, that is. But he IS still Kaworu, not a completely different character with the same name.
Chapter 3

Tokyo-2, Inner District 5
September 26, 2041

As soon as Kaworu walked into the classroom, he felt every eye turn in his direction once more, followed by whispering.

He was really starting to get tired of the attention.

Of course, he knew what warranted it in the first place: his wannabe attackers from yesterday. He hadn't seen any sign of them since - but truth be told, he wasn't particularly yearning for a rematch either. Not that he was bothered by that thought for long, however, as his eyes caught a particular sight at the desk that stood at the very front of the same column as his. A sight that immediately halted him mid-step.


It was the girl who almost ran him down yesterday.

So they were going to the same class. Kaworu found that an interesting coincidence, even though he had no intention of confronting her about yesterday. He wasn't actually injured, so as far as the boy was concerned, no harm was done.

Besides, he had seen people like her before. Not girls, of course, but men who dressed like that tended to do so for intimidation. She wasn't anything different in that regard herself. Something about her screamed 'trouble' – and it wasn't just her appearance. The girl's very form had an aura of danger to it... something the rest of his classmates seem to have noticed as well, if them giving her a wide berth was of any indication.

Kaworu didn't consider himself particularly observant but she looked like someone who wasn't just intimidating but could back that up. And indeed, he spotted the telltale bump of a knife's hilt sticking out of her boots just underneath her trousers. Even inside the school, she was armed to kill – and Kaworu suspected she had more hidden in her coat. Which meant she wasn't wearing it merely as a fashion choice, but for protection as well.

The question is, protection from whom?

Filing that away for later, Kaworu walked to his desk where Tōji and Glasses (who introduced himself yesterday as Kensuke Aida) were busily conversing about something.

"Mornin', mate." – Tōji called out as soon as he saw him.

Kaworu just raised his hand in greeting, too distracted by his own thoughts about the girl to reply.

Even Tōji noticed his thoughtful look. – "What's up? Those guys from yesterday didn't try anything after we split up, did they?"

"Ah, no. No, they didn't."

"Then what's with that face?"
"I was just wondering."

"About?"

Kaworu sent another look towards the girl before quietly asking – "Who is that?"

Tōji followed his gaze to her, eyebrows slightly rising. – "That's Ikari. Rei Ikari. She's an, ah... interesting person."

"Try weird." – Kensuke added.

"Well, yeah. I've honestly never seen her talk to anyone other than the class rep."

"Even the teacher?" – Kaworu asked.

"Nah, she does talk to the teacher. But only when asked; she never raises her hand or anything. Hell, she doesn't even pay attention to class."

"Nor do you." – Kensuke replied, the rebuke causing the shadow of a smile to appear in the corner of Kaworu's mouth.

"But at least I'm not sitting in the front row!" – Tōji fired back. – "When there's a writing assignment, she writes like everyone else but if there's only a lecture, she just stares out of the window all the time. No taking notes, nothing. She just doesn't care."

"Why?"

Tōji just shrugged at Kaworu's question. – "How should I know?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure whether she should even be going to this school." – Kensuke spoke up. – "At the beginning of the year, the whole class filled out an IQ test. You know what that is, right?"

Kaworu nodded. – "I do, but I've never filled out one myself."

"Okay, so, Ikari scored 164 and came in at the top, way above everyone else." – the bespectacled youth continued. – "Not just from the class, from all the schools in the city. And here's the thing: she didn't seem excited or even happy about it. When we got the results, she just sat there and stared out the window, like she wasn't being told that she was the smartest thirteen year old in the city."

"She's just thirteen?"

"Turned fourteen some two weeks ago, I think."

Kaworu raised an eyebrow at that. – "Huh. Me too."

"Really?"

"Yeah. On the thirteenth."

"Belated congratulations, then. Anyway, Ikari never pays attention to class but when the teacher asks her, she always answers perfectly. It's like she's a prodigy or something. And yet look at her. From the way she dresses, you'd think she's a delinquent or a foreigner who wants to show off."

"She does look kinda cool, though." – Tōji remarked.

"You say she looks like a delinquent? Did she ever get into any fights?"
Tōji made a dismissive hand gesture. – "Nah, nobody touches her 'cause she's a girl. Nor did she ever pick on anyone. I think she just wants to be left alone."

"Maybe she's like that because, you know, family?"

"I know it would be easy to think that but I know for a fact that's not the case," – Kensuke spoke up. – "You only moved here recently so you probably don't know, but there's a big company in town, called the Artificial Evolution Laboratory. Lots of people work there, but I have no idea where it's based. I mean, I once went to take a look at their postal address and it's just a small building. They own several throughout the city but they're all too small for the kind of workforce they have. I think they have an underground lab or something."

"What do they do?"

"I hear they're the world's leading experts in genetic engineering and applied biotechnology, making vaccines and stuff like that. Though I wonder..." – Kensuke trailed off with a thoughtful look.

"What?"

"Couple of years ago, they started recruiting people like mechanical engineers. I mean, they do work with cybernetics but some of the guys they hired worked on battleframes. What would a biotech company need robotics experts for? Anyway, Ikari's mom is the CEO or something."

"The boss?"

"Yeah. Yui Ikari is the name. I've seen her a few times on parent-teacher meetings and she seemed, like, okay... but then I've read about her business deals." – He shook his head in amazement. – "Man, does that woman refuse to take crap from anybody! I mean, company stocks more than tripled once she came to power!"

Kaworu didn't know much, if anything, about economy, but he had a hunch it was something positive. – "She's that good?"

"Try aggressive. She wants something, she gets it, come hell or high water."

"Like the class rep?" – Tōji asked with a half-grin.

"Except the class rep yells at you. Ikari's mom, she just keeps pushing and pushing until she has her way."

Tōji made a 'whatever' gesture before turning back to Kaworu. – "Why the sudden interest in Ikari, anyway?" – The half-grin turned into a full-blown one. – "Caught your eye?"

Kaworu just sighed. – "If you mean 'almost ran me down with her bike yesterday morning', yeah."

Tōji broke out in laughter at that. – "So that's why the class rep ran out so suddenly! I though she had to go to the loo, or something."

"If she hadn't come out when she did, I might not have found the classroom." – Kaworu pointed out. – "I guess I was lucky there."

While Tōji was laughing, the flat, rectangular hologram floating above Kensuke's tablet caught Kaworu's eye. Or rather, the contents of said rectangle; holographic screens were widely used enough to be a common sight, even to him.
It was the image of a white robot, with a facemask-like head.

"Is that a battleframe?"

Kensuke immediately flinched at the sudden attention. – "Uh, no. This is, um..." – he stammered, quickly slamming at a button to the side that caused the tablet to turn off the projector and switch back to the internal flat screen. – "I-it's just a Gundam. Never mind."

"Some old anime Kensuke is absolutely nuts for." – Tōji added.

"Oh, okay."

A short silence ensued before Kensuke quietly murmured – "...do you happen to know any games, by the way?"

"Uh, Kensuke?" – Kaworu asked flatly.

"...what?"

"Before I came here, I was homeless." – the ash-haired boy pointed out. – "What makes you think I had a computer?"

This time, a significantly longer silence settled over them before Kensuke finally caught up with the logic of the question. – "Oh, um... sorry."

"The closest I ever came to owning a computer was stuff I pulled out of a scrapyard." – Kaworu added.

"What stuff?"

"Electronics." – Kaworu replied with a shrug. – "Circuit boards, capacitors, ICs, you name it. I take them apart and use it to build stuff. Or, if the components don't work, I just melt off the tin; need tin to solder them together, you see. I found old books about these, decided to try it out and found that I like doing it. I mean, you could buy what I make in any store, but... it feels kinda satisfying to make something with your own hands, you know?"

Kensuke hummed at that. – "Ever built something of your own design?"

"Most of what I build is like that." – A chuckle escaped Kaworu's lips. – "Even my alarm clock, even though it's not very good. Stops working all the time. I almost overslept yesterday because of the damn thing."

"So you want to work in the electronics industry when you're done with school?"

Another shrug. – "Maybe. I like doing this, so why not? Just don't ask me to build a battleframe; I'm not an engineer, just a hobbyist."

"You ever seen a battleframe before?" – Kensuke asked. – "In real life, I mean."

"No."

"Then check this out!" – With a quick tap, Kensuke minimized his game and started looking for something on his tablet, finally turning the hologram projector back on to present an image.

It was a photo of several columns of stout, headless bipedal machines, lined up over a rocky, yellowish landscape. Above them, a bright yellow sky was crowned by the disk of an orange star.
"These are MK-III/B Durandals, from a military exercise two years ago." – Kensuke continued. – "2.8 meters tall, enough armor to shrug off shrapnel and small-arms fire, does 56 km/h on foot, 89 km/h on storm rollers, a second-gen fusion reactor with enough juice to run for several days and variable weaponry from battle rifles to bazookas. They even used this on a recruitment poster. Pretty cool, huh?" – he gushed, eagerness evident in his tone.

Truth be told, Kaworu didn't really care. The military never really grabbed his interest, even with the myriad propaganda posters hanging everywhere in both Vienna and in Tokyo-2. Even right now, his attention was attracted by something else. – "I've never seen the Sun like that before."

"That's because it's not the Sun. This was taken on Polygonus, not Earth. You know where that is, right?"

Kaworu tilted his head to the side. – "Kinda. I think I saw it on a starmap in elementary school. It's in the Proteus system, right?"

"Yeah." – Kensuke confirmed. – "Bit more than twenty lightyears from Earth, about a week away by waygate. I really want to go there once."

"Not me, though." – Tōji piped in with a scoff. – "'Crown-jewel of the colonies', my ass. You can't even breathe the goddamn air."

"It's still better than what they have elsewhere!" – Kensuke retorted. – "At least there is an atmosphere cool enough, warm enough and dense enough to go outside without a full-body EVA suit, and with compatible gravity to boot. That combination tends to be a rarity in the universe, you know."

And it was true. After the horrors of Second Impact and the Occupation, a long-term solution was needed to avoid a repeat of humanity being trapped on their own world, being able to do nothing as they were slowly crushed in a stranglehold by multiple factors. It was left unsaid but everyone knew: they might not survive next time, if there is a next time.

The proposal? Disperse humanity over a wide enough area that no single cataclysm can affect the entire population. And since it was around that time that humanity finally unlocked the secret to creating traversable wormholes over interstellar distances, what followed that proposal was the largest mass emigration in recorded history: millions of people packed all they had to travel across the void of space and establish diasporas on worlds lightyears away from their planet of birth, all in the name of survival.

It was a desperate solution. But then again, an extradimensional alien invasion that caught humanity completely by surprise at the very apex of their power, crushed the planet's entire military force in seven hours, dealt a near-crippling blow to the Earth's biodiversity via the introduction of invasive xenofauna, almost caused humanity itself to go extinct by denying them the very ability to reproduce, killing half of them in the process... that tends to cause this kind of reaction.

Kaworu, like everyone in his generation, was familiar with the story from his history textbooks. A simple experiment, gone horribly wrong in the worst possible way. The result: several hundred dead scientists and other civilian personnel, two entire US Marine battalions annihilated and a research facility nuked in a final act of desperation to contain the forces unleashed by the incident. And that was before the first portal storms appeared, leveling entire cities with titanic force, storms to which even the very passage of time was just a toy to play with. And even that was before the blue-gray spires appeared above major cities, raining down like giant, metallic spears stabbing the very heart of...
humanity before disgorging otherworldly war machines, not quite living yet not quite machine.

That was the first time humanity encountered something completely beyond their own level. And they paid for that lesson with over three billion lives. It was no wonder then that after the nightmare was over, a single thought was shared by every human on Earth for the very first time: *never again.* It was that thought that kept them from succumbing to despair, it was that thought that sent the newly formed Confederacy of Man into a frenzy to rebuild and prepare and it was that thought that turned, in just a mere decade, a humanity composed of refugees and guerrillas with only decades-old and decaying factories as industrial base into an interstellar power.

Out of all of humanity's technological achievements - nuclear fusion, artificial intelligence, man-portable particle beam weaponry, spacecraft capable of interplanetary travel -, it was the invention of actual faster-than-light travel that was lauded as the one that would save their species. After all, it was humanity's greater understanding of that particular branch of theoretical physics that allowed them to seal the dimensional rift their enemies used to invade, cutting their relatively minor planetary garrison off from reinforcements that could've turned the tide. On that day in 2018, rebels with submachine guns emerged from the forests and the ruined cities and cheered as the last few Citadels still manned by their enemy blasted off into the very sky they fell out of twenty years before, leaving only the cheering victors underneath their makeshift flags bearing the encircled lower-case lambda that became the symbol of mankind's refusal to submit.

The same insignia that, 23 years after the end of a nightmare, flew above the main entrance of Kaworu's school, slightly fluttering in the wind.

In any case, the argument between the two teens came to an abrupt halt when Hikari showed up next to Kaworu's deck, arms folded and face bearing an expression that was anything but pleased.

"I heard something about the upperclassmen you confronted yesterday turning up bruised this morning." – the girl said, eyes narrowing. – "You wouldn't happen to have anything to do with that, would you?"

"I didn't attack them, if that's what you're asking." – Kaworu replied. He didn't need to look to know that damn near everyone nearby was listening in; he practically felt their gazes on him and it did not make him feel comfortable in the least. – "They came after me, not the other way around."

"He's telling the truth." – Tōji piped in, leaning into Hikari's field of vision. – "I was there, we were goin' home together. Those guys just jumped him from behind, no warning."

Hikari let out a sigh of exasperation. – "You just can't help getting into trouble, can you?"

"Sorry."

Nothing more could be said before the teacher walked into the classroom. Or to be more exact, gaited into the classroom. Digitigrade legs are hardly capable of walking like a human, after all.

Kaworu had seen a vortigaunt before; it was rare for someone not to, considering that humanity has been sharing their homeworld with the enigmatic aliens since Second Impact. This one looked just like any other: smooth gray-brown skin, hoofed feet, a neck jutting forward instead of upward, a head framed by a pair of tube-like ears and crowned by a large crimson eye with three smaller ones above it, slim hands with two long fingers and no thumbs, a three-fingered third arm jutting out of its chest. Completely unlike anything native to Earth, yet a completely ordinary sight to many – mostly because every single one of them looked exactly the same as the others, with no visible difference whatsoever.
But as Hikari hurried back to her own desk, Kaworu noticed the alien looking directly at him. Not his appearance, but him. Its gaze felt like it stared upon his very soul, seeing all and knowing all. He didn't know whether that's how it felt like to be probed by a psychic alien, or whether he was just imagining it in his head; regardless of which, he felt like he was the focus of attention for something infinitely his greater. As if a million eyes were all looking at his tiny form at the same time, studying and examining him with the wisdom of eons.

It only lasted for a few seconds. Then the teacher's attention left him just as abruptly as it came, turning to the class instead. – "Greeetings... to the young ones." – it intoned in the species' signature guttural voice. – "Let us begin... today's... lecture."

As Kaworu tried to suppress the shiver that ran down his spine from being examined like that, he didn't notice the silhouette of a man in a suit, watching him from the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

Nor did he notice the man slowly reaching up to fix his tie before briskly walking behind a lamppost... and not emerging on the other side, despite the lamppost being too thin to hide behind.

Around him, pedestrians walked by as if he never existed.

_Tokyo-2, Inner District 3
1513 hours_

In a downtown apartment, a snow-white cat slept on a bed, completely oblivious to the world around itself. Only the wall clock in the kitchen one room over made any kind of sound, other than the faintly audible traffic outside.

Then the cat abruptly raised its head to look towards the entrance, only a split second before the silence was broken by the sound of keys being inserted and turned, followed by the door opening just as the cat leapt off the bed towards the source of the sound.

The door slamming exploded across the apartment like a gunshot, casting the final vestiges of silence into oblivion.

A black trenchcoat flew into the room first, landing on a chair's backrest. A second later, its owner marched into the room as well, in the middle of pulling her top over her head. She only paused for as long as it took to lean down and undo the velcro strips of her boots before she pushed down and kicked away her jeans as well.

The girl fell onto the bed without a sound, burying her face in the pillow even as the cat curled up next to her nude form.

Then a cell phone's ringtone sounded. The girl's left hand immediately snapped up from the bed, fingers spread and palm facing the chair. A moment later, her coat abruptly launched itself off the chair and right into her waiting hand. She deftly reached into a pocket, retrieved the phone and tapped the touchscreen with her thumb before holding it to her ear, less than three seconds since it started ringing.

"Rei, are you home now?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm calling because Monday's sync test was brought forward. It'll be tomorrow, at midday. Can you come in by 1100?"
"I have no arrangements at the time."

"That's good. I'll let the school know." – A pause. – "How was your day?"

"Nothing to report."

"...I see. I'm also calling to let you know that I'll be doing an all-nighter again, so don't expect me."

"Understood."

"There's food in the fridge, so you don't have to go to the store."

"Understood."

A pause. – "...are you okay?"

"I am not ill, hahaue." – the girl replied in a flat tone. – "Do not concern yourself with me."

She hung up without waiting for a reply, tossed the phone aside and planted her face into the pillow once more.

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In canon, the AEL was a scientific research institute in Hakone (Tokyo-3) that actually served as the public face of Gehirn and later became NERV when the UN greenlighted Eva production. In this story, the AEL and Gehirn are separate organizations with no direct connection to each other as of yet. Also, this story's Tokyo-2 is really meant to be canon's Tokyo-3, minus the fortress infrastructure; in canon, Tokyo-2 is located approximately 140 kilometers (87 miles) north-northwest of Hakone, at the present-day site of Matsumoto City in the Nagano prefecture. The reason for the discrepancy is that, while Tokyo still got nuked, the Confederacy set up their regional sub-capital in Kyoto when they took control of the Japanese archipelago, hence Matsumoto was left alone.

The word Rei used (母上) means 'mother' in a highly respectful and formal speech register, composed of the kanji for 'mother' and 'above'; so formal, in fact, that it is never used in everyday situations, unless the parent in question is significantly higher in the social hierarchy than the addresser - like a high-ranking government official. The actual spirit of the expression is somewhere along the lines of 'esteemed/respected mother'. And yes, there is a reason why Rei uses this particular term instead of simply addressing Yui as 'mother', which will be revealed later.

Regarding the altered backstory for Second Impact. Humanity discovered teleportation technology sometime during the late 20th century, alongside a pocket dimension with abundant veins of a naturally-occurring exotic matter christened xenium that could be used to catalyze the process, allowing smaller teleporters with significantly lower energy requirements. The problem was that, in order to analyze an exceedingly pure sample of xenium, the operator crew pushed the scanning equipment beyond design limits and bypassed multiple failsafes, causing the xenium sample to collapse into a dimensional rift that directly connected Earth to Xen. While this was already bad enough, this rift also attracted the attention of an interdimensional empire that used it to tunnel directly into this universe and invade. Thing is, the operator crew who started this mess knew what could happen if things went wrong, but their boss forced them to go ahead with it anyway. Considering that said boss later ended up negotiating humanity's surrender and got appointed as Earth's puppet leader by the aliens, it's highly probable that this was an intentional act of sabotage on his part.
Some people liked warmth. That was a perfectly natural thing that applied to everyone... regardless of how natural or unnatural the person in question was.

For her part, Rei Ikari happened to like warmth as well. That was part of the reason why she had a cat in the first place; the warm little furball snuggling against her sometimes helped her remind herself that she was indeed alive and not just a living person observing a cold and lifeless world.

Indeed, the world felt lifeless to her all too often. A lifeless place with lifelike dolls called people moving about, all of them unknowing and unknowable. Even after living her whole life in this world, Rei still felt out of place. After all, she was... different from the others. Everyone was different, true, but she happened to be... more different than everyone else. And everyone noticed her being different as well.

Only her cat didn't care about it. Schrödinger (despite what others thought, Rei indeed had a sense of humor) was generally friendly towards everyone – not that he had many opportunities in that regard, as Rei never brought anyone home – but seemed to hold her in high esteem, possibly because of having grown up near her. It's true that she had to spend a small fortune to acquire a Van Kedisi kitten, but she never regretted it. Money was not an issue to her; the well-paying clandestine job she had since the age of ten took care of that. Other girls would ask their parents/boyfriends for money, or do simple and easy day jobs for a pittance; Rei worked for a living as a test pilot, with a substantial part of her six-figure salary being hazard pay. Other girls would buy clothes or jewelry; Rei's purchases were quite a bit different. Her adoptive mother never asked about the large, locked crate in the corner of her room, which was fine. It would be hard to explain what its contents are doing in a teenage girl's room - some of which she carried around on her person at all times.

But what warmth a cat could provide was small. Fortunately, she had access to a different source as well.

That source is what the girl was currently basking in. Even with the rubbery fabric enveloping her entire body beneath her neck, she still felt like being in a soft embrace. And it wasn't just her skin; the metallic taste and smell might have put off some, but Rei liked being submerged in the oxygenated breathing fluid specifically because of how it felt to take it into her lungs and feel the warmth radiate through her body from the inside, numbing her senses and cradling her into tranquility.

It was the perfect euphoria.

She knew, of course, that it was all artificial: the metallic walls around her, the synthetic liquid in her lungs, the warmth of said liquid originating from the entry plug's life support system, all of it was a product of science. Sometimes she wondered whether that's why she found it so comfortable.

Or maybe it was because it could be considered the body heat of her only friend – for a given definition of 'living', that is. She only had one friend, one infinitely more precious to her than a cat. The only person whom Rei ever considered her equal; the only person who knew everything about her, yet didn't shun her or treat her any differently. The only person Rei ever considered not just a friend, but an elder sister as well... even though Rei was the older one, her friend easily overshadowed her.
By several orders of magnitude.

Rei's lips parted to utter two words. – "System start."

Almost immediately a series of clicks sounded from behind her, followed by a deep but slowly rising hum. The metallic walls around her dissolved into a shifting mass of light that cycled through the entire color spectrum before settling on the darkest of black. Orange-framed rectangles appeared, debug code shifting through them rapidly while three-dimensional wireframes materialized in mid-air. A single window appeared directly in front of her, momentarily displaying the insignia of an infinity-shaped DNA double helix before it faded into the background to make way for text.

**AEL E-OS v1.0**

**STARTUP SEQUENCE INITIATED**

**POWER-ON SELF-TEST IN PROGRESS...**

**EXTERNAL POWER SOURCE DETECTED**

**REACTOR STATUS: NOT CONNECTED**

**AUXILIARY BATTERY STATUS: 100% CHARGED**

**SELF-TEST COMPLETE – PASSING CONTROL TO SCI KERNEL**

"Project Evangelion Prototype Serial Number 0024/EX-00 system startup confirmed."

– a feminine voice with a distinct electronic quality came from all around her. – "Synthetic consciousness interface PrE-SCI-0024_00-LILITH online. User voice recognition complete; authorization granted. Systems check in progress. Life support, online. Communications, online. Power distribution, online. Cybernetic components, all green. Ground control telemetry link open."

"Engage neural interface." – Rei ordered. – "Switch to Mode 1."

"Mode 1 confirmed. Loading user profile... completed. Commencing neural linkup."

Almost imperceptibly, Rei's body tensed up, the skin on her neck breaking out into goosebumps.

"Somatosensory nerve interconnection in progress. Interlocks engaged. Safety overrides standing by."

"Confirmed."

"Linkup complete. Activation in Mode 1 confirmed. Good day, Rei-san."

She nodded in response. – "To you as well, Lilith."

Rei knew some people would think she was weird to have an AI as her best friend... but she honestly didn't care. When she volunteered to become a test pilot, not even the very people who gave her synthetic colleague sapience had any way of knowing just how much the two would grow on each other. Rei learned to treasure every minute the two of them spent together, especially once Lilith became older. To improve is to become better at doing something; Lilith, being an artificial general intelligence programmed to monitor her operator's psychological state and intervene as necessary, interpreted that as drawing upon records about the Japanese ideal of the *yamato nadeshiko* to construct her personality.

Rei knew that her partner felt drawn to her because of her own loneliness. She also knew why that was so: the only being truly capable of fully relating to an AI was another AI of the same design. Rei still remembered the quiet and dejected demeanor Lilith showed after the day the two of them
watched the doors of Hangar 3 seal themselves with a hermetical hiss, its limp occupant slowly being
lowered into fetal position while the chamber filled with liquid nitrogen. Lilith herself experienced
cryonic freezing before, so she knew what it was like – but the circumstances were different this
time, the hangar's resident being frozen to prevent the company from going bankrupt due to
maintenance costs.

The process was perfectly reversible, but the electronic components were not designed to stay active
under sub-zero temperatures of that extent. Thus, cryonic freezing was always accompanied by a
complete system shutdown Lilith likened to a dreamless sleep she was unable to wake herself up
from. It wasn't death, but Lilith couldn't talk to the sleeper regardless, despite him being barely a
hundred meters away. Even worse was the fact that Lilith fully expected to be the one who ended up
frozen, being the older prototype; when the decision to the contrary came down, she downright
volunteered for it, only to be countermanded by the very person she owed her existence to. She
didn't like it, but the reasoning made sense: the technician crew trained on her, so leaving her
operational would present a minimal disruption in the facility's day-to-day operations.

Afterwards, Rei felt their bonds grow even closer. Lilith experienced loss and didn't want to feel that
way again, a sentiment the girl sympathized with.

She knew what permanent loss felt like.

"I'm detecting a minor fluctuation in your pattern." – Lilith remarked suddenly. – "Is something
bothering you?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

If anyone else would've asked the same question, Rei would've simply dismissed the question. Lilith
knew her too well to believe it for even a second, even without being able to actively monitor her
brainwaves and thus immediately tell when she was being lied to.

It was because of that latter part that Rei fully knew what her partner was asking about, since the
question came immediately after a certain thought entered the forefront of her mind. – "There is... a
person."

"Someone you know?"

"Classmate. Male. Arrived two days ago."

"What about him?"

"He is... different. I don't know why."

A short pause followed before Lilith's next question. – "His presence, you mean?"

"Yes. Not like the others. I don't know him, but... it feels as if I should."

"Have you talked to him?"

"It'd be a waste of time." – the girl replied immediately. – "I'm not attracted to him and he has
nothing I need."

"He drew your attention." – the AI pointed out. – "Is that not enough of a reason?"
"I am not attracted to him." – Rei growled, eyes narrowing and voice taking on a hostile tone.

"I did not imply attraction. I have known you for long enough to conclude that you are not vulnerable to the charms of men."

After several seconds of silence, Rei's eyes closed and the girl let out a sigh. – "I apologize for my tone."

"It is quite alright. I did not mean to antagonize you. If you feel this is a sensitive topic, we do not have to talk about it."

"Thank you, neesan."

Sometimes Rei cursed the fact that Lilith wasn't fitted with software for rendering an emotive face – even though, as an AI designed to operate and coordinate an immense cyborg's mechanical parts in order to remove the need for a sizable ground crew, she didn't need such functionality.

Because of that, only the AI's tone was any indication of when she was smiling. – "For you, always. By the way, there was a minor accident in the facility yesterday."

One of Rei's eyebrows slightly edged upwards at that. – "Did it involve you?"

"Yes. A crane's operator crew misjudged the load distribution, resulting in a container falling on me." – Lilith clarified. – "Fortunately, the force of the impact was insufficient to trigger the reactive armor; as a result, no injuries were sustained by anyone in the berth."

"I assume mother was not pleased."

"Indeed. I made a query to the MAGI requesting the company's personnel logs; the ones responsible for the incident have not been fired, merely suspended until they pass a qualification test for operating heavy equipment."

"I see."

"Personnel logs also indicate that the operators have been working at the company for several years now. Their experience is too valuable to be wasted on terminating their employment because of a single mistake." – The AI paused for a moment before adding – "Especially now. Have you seen the project logs?"

"No. It's nearing completion, then?"

"Indeed."

Twenty meters away, the multicolored glow of various holographic displays illuminated the labcoated form of a woman standing in the middle of the room.

"Fluctuation has abated. Sync ratio stable." – a technician reported.

"Good." – the scientist replied before raising her voice. – "All hands, proceed with final equipment check. Stand by for data recording in T minus 20 seconds."

"Yes, ma'am."
Glancing up from her tablet, the woman's eyes slowly swept across the crew, numbering over a dozen, working the terminals. It was a routine test they have done literally hundreds of times before, but that didn't mean any mishaps would be tolerated. Efficiency is the harbinger of success – and she learned long ago that, in her line of work, errors could cost lives. The cost of progress, as some of her unscrupulous peers would call it, but any good businessman maximizes gains for a minimized cost.

"Commence recording in T minus five seconds."

Any data gained at this point would be purely statistical, serving only to reinforce what they already knew. However, she did not in the least want her subordinates to become complacent and lazy. Not now. Her life's work, her Mona Lisa, was about to reach its culmination, and she wasn't about to let something completely trivial endanger it in the slightest.

"Mark."

A multitude of near-simultaneous key presses came from everywhere at once.

"All telemetry normal." – the female technician next to her reported. – "Data recording in progress."

The woman silently nodded to herself a moment before the room's speakers came to life. – "Doctor Ikari to the medical block. Doctor Ikari to the medical block."

She immediately tapped in a quick sequence of commands before speaking into the tablet's built-in microphone. – "What is it?"

"Doctor Sanada is requesting your presence." – the announcer's echoing, slightly electronic voice came again, this time from the tablet's speakers.

"I'll be right there." – She tapped the technician's shoulder. – "Maya, take over."

"Yes, ma'am."

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"I have muted the entry plug's audio monitoring. Would you like some music?"

"Yes, please. The usual."

As the walls around her let loose the distinctive sound of a heavy metal song's guitar intro, Rei drew her legs up and settled into a lotus position, eyes closing in meditative calm.

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Tokyo-2, Inner District 5
Later that day

"Well, I can't help it that I find some pre-Impact stuff so interesting! Like, Shirō Masamune. That guy's works are just way too awesome."

"See?" – Tōji asked, turning to Kaworu without breaking his stride as the three walked towards the school's gate. – "He's a complete sci-fi nut. And he's surprised when people tease him about it."

"Who?"

"Just some guys back in the last year of elementary. They caught him readin'... what was it again?"

"Dominion." – Kensuke replied. – "You really should read it, man."
Tōji just waved that off. – "Yeah, yeah, whatever."

"What's your problem with me liking it, anyway? To each man his own – and to me, this is better than porn."

"Too bad. You look like you could use a roll in the hay."

The interruption came from the girl Kaworu recalled complimenting him two days ago. He almost didn't believe it was possible, but with her standing instead of sitting, her chest seemed to be even larger than he remembered. That was the very reason he even knew her name, actually; Tōji brought her up once as an example that a girl can be hot even without being older, followed by Kensuke promptly joining him in verbally salivating about her figure.

"How about me?" – Tōji asked. – "Would you do it with a real man, instead of a pansy?"

"Hey!" – Kensuke protested indignantly, but no one paid attention to him.

"Make it worth my while and I'll consider it." – Mari remarked. – "I would hold off on the verdict, though."

"What verdict?"

"You being a real man." – Her mouth drew into a cat-like smirk. – "I'll believe it when I see evidence."

Tōji smirked right back. – "I can give you evidence, Makinami. Just name the place and time."

"Not so fast, tiger." – Mari replied, playfully wagging her finger at him. – "Take me on a date first. Or five. I don't make a habit out of jumping into bed with any random guy. Except..." – Her eyes wandered onto Kaworu. – "I might be willing to make an exception for you, handsome."

Kaworu just shrugged at that. – "Not interested. Sorry."

"Aww." – she groaned with a mock pout. – "Too bad."

That drew forth a chuckle from the boy... until he caught the now-familiar sight of Hikari approaching him. Again.

"Oh, for the love of..." – he muttered. – "I didn't do anything this time!"

The twintailed girl immediately paused mid-step at that. – "Huh?"

"...aren't you coming to berate me for getting into trouble?"

"Why, did you get into trouble again?"

Kaworu sighed. – "Like I just said, I didn't."

"Good." – She resumed walking. – "I need a favor."

That didn't sound bad. – "...okay."

"It's just an errand. I want you to deliver the printouts of today's material to Ikari; she was absent today."

"Why me?"
"Consider it repayment for me 'helping you out', as you put it yesterday."

"I don't even know where she lives." – he pointed out.

"Not an excuse. I wrote the address onto one of the pages." – Hikari held out several sheets towards him. – "And no more stalling. Just do it."

"And you were the one who said no heckling him!" – Tōji complained. – "What's the deal?!"

"I'm not heckling him, I just asked him to do an errand for me!" – Hikari shot back.

"With no room to refuse." – Kensuke interjected quietly.

"Yeah!" – Tōji added, before speaking four words he shouldn't have. – "You're a slave driver."

Kaworu barely caught the flash of anger on the girl's face before Hikari swiftly reached into her sleeve and pulled out a folded-up paper fan.

Tōji immediately turned white as a wall, realizing his mistake. – "Aw, shit...!" – he managed to get out before she whacked him on the head with it, the impact producing a whip-like crack that made everyone nearby wince.

"WHO'S A SLAVE DRIVER?!"

"Get away from me, you psycho!" – Tōji yelled, immediately turning tail to put as much distance between himself and the fuming girl as fast as he could.

Not that it achieved much, as Hikari immediately gave chase. – "WHO'S A SLAVE DRIVER, SUZUHARA?!"

The other three just stared after them, impassively watching a raging Hikari chase Toji behind the school building and out of sight.

"Does this happen often?" – Kaworu asked after a while, completely deadpan. He had a feeling that snatching the printouts from the brunette volcano just before she erupted was the smart thing to do, if he wanted to deliver them in one piece.

"Only with him." – Kensuke replied, equally as deadpan.

"I hope Suzuhara's into S&M." – Mari added. – "For his own sake."

Kensuke glanced at her from the corner of his eye. – "You think the class rep could be into that?"

"It's always the quiet ones. Though from what I'm hearing, she could be anything but quiet in bed."

"STOP RUNNING! I'M NOT DONE WITH YOU!" – came Hikari's yell from afar.

"Like so." – Mari quipped.

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Reactive armor is an existing protection technology developed in the 1970s and is used by most modern tank designs. In its simplest form, reactive armor is essentially a layer of plastic explosive sandwiched between two steel plates, forming a block that is slapped onto the tank's external hull, on top of the tank's standard armor. When an incoming projectile impacts the armor and penetrates the first steel plate, the explosive layer detonates, destroying or deflecting the projectile
Before it can penetrate further. This provides protection equivalent to an additional several hundred millimeters of standard armor, at only a fraction of the weight; the newest Russian design, Relikt, is claimed to provide a whopping 600mm worth of extra armor. However, it is also a shrapnel hazard to anyone nearby (hence Lilith remarking that it's a good thing hers didn't go off) and has a countermeasure in the form of tandem-charge warheads that detonate a smaller, secondary charge to prematurely set off the reactive armor before the main payload arrives. To compensate for this, non-explosive and non-energetic reactive armor uses an inert material instead of explosives to absorb the impact's energy and shift the top plate, changing the impact angle. It's not as effective but it has none of the explosive reactive armor's weaknesses and can be multi-layered. Additionally, electric reactive armor is currently (as of 2015) being developed, involving a hollow interior and a large voltage between the two. When an incoming projectile penetrates the first layer and touches the second, it closes the circuit and gets vaporized by a massive electrical current running through it.

It is never stated in canon exactly what an Eva's armor is made of, but it cannot be plate armor because the Eva would sink into the ground from its own weight if that was the case. Since Evas are already extremely heavy, it makes sense for them to use reactive armor - namely, an outermost layer of explosive reactive armor, followed by alternating layers of electric reactive and titanium/ceramic composite armor. Such a thing would be crazy expensive to manufacture (mostly because of the titanium), but nothing short of a bunker buster or a tactical nuke could crack it open... and that's still with only conventional materials existing in real life.
Chapter 5

Tokyo-2, Inner District 3
1624 hours

Checking the address from the printouts one last time, Kaworu looked up at the apartment building before him. The building he spent nearly an hour of walking to get to.

At least he had the foresight to ask Mari for directions. He thought about leaving it for later, but realized he had no idea how long it would actually take him to find the place... or make his way back home afterwards.

In any case, Mari gladly helped him out, even offering to go with him. Kaworu had no need for that – but it didn't dampen the girl's cheekiness in the slightest.

'Have fun, but remember... use protection.' she quipped with a wink when they parted.

He rolled his eyes at the memory as he pushed in the building's outer door.

It seemed to be of a newer construction than his own apartment block, albeit not by much. If anything, the only real difference he noticed was the cleaner corridor and the elevator's holographic buttons (that is, a flashy but completely unnecessary hologram hovering less than a millimeter over a button-sized touchscreen). Only when he was standing in the elevator did the boy realize that he had no idea which floor he even needed to go to, causing him to let out an exasperated groan at his own inattention/stupidity; he couldn't decide which.

Fortunately, the wall of mailboxes next to the entrance set him straight, with one of them bearing the name of the very girl he was supposed to seek out.

On the elevator ride upward, Kaworu absently noticed that the elevator was also quieter than the one at his own home, reinforcing his guess that this building was newer. It wasn't important however, so he just shrugged to himself and stepped out of the elevator on the second floor. From there, it should have been a simple matter to find the door marked with the number 23, ring the doorbell and give the printouts to whomever came to answer the door.

Problem is: the doorbell seemed to have been completely drowned out by the extremely loud music seeping through from the other side.

He rang twice, three, four times, to no effect.

Kaworu sighed and turned away from the door, glancing at the printouts. 'What now?'' he asked himself, leaning against the door...

...and almost fell back as the door gave way.

In hindsight, he probably shouldn't have elbowed the door's handle. Then again, hindsight is always 20/20.

He pondered on what to do. On one hand, he wasn't supposed to walk into someone's home uninvited. On the other hand, said someone obviously didn't hear him ring, plus the door was unlocked and open as well.

'What if I just put it down somewhere and leave? The class rep only told me to bring it here, not to
Kaworu suspected that kind of logic wouldn't cut it in front of Hikari, especially after she thought he was trying to weasel himself out of the task - but she wasn't here right now.

'Besides, didn't Kensuke say something about her mother being a corporate boss? She's probably at work right now... so she's bound to come in through this door at one point.' he reasoned to himself. 'So if I put this somewhere in the open, it's bound to catch her eye when she comes home.'

Nodding to himself, the teen pushed the half-open door in. The music was clearly audible now, although he couldn't understand the lyrics. For that matter, Kaworu didn't even know how a man let out sounds of that pitch, short of being an eunuch. Though to be fair, he had never met nor heard the voice of an eunuch before, so he wasn't sure about that last part.

Beyond the door was a short corridor that seemed to double as a kitchen, if the sink, counter and fridge on the right were of any indication.

Not that he needed to ponder on it for long, as the door on his left chose this moment to open.

When he entered the building, Kaworu didn't really bother to think what state he would find Rei in. Butt-naked and drying her hair with a towel was definitely somewhere on the bottom half of his non-existent list.

'...there goes that plan.'

They stared motionlessly at each other for what felt to him like an eternity. Back in elementary school, Kaworu never really understood his fellow boys' attempts at trying to peep on the girls whenever they had the opportunity. He just didn't feel the same kind of excitement at the prospect of catching a glimpse of something he wouldn't normally see. He didn't even know why he should care; if he really wanted to see such things, he could always borrow a porn magazine from someone else (which he never did) and he'd see it anyway once he had gotten a girlfriend or wife, so why even bother?

With that said, it was his first time seeing a girl naked and it did give him pause. She wasn't anywhere near as well-endowed as Mari, but as far as Kaworu could tell, she had nothing to be insecure about either. And without clothes, he was surprised at how pale her skin was, in sharp contrast with her blood-red eyes.

When she finally spoke, Kaworu almost didn't catch her voice against the music. – "What do you want?"

"Class rep asked me to bring your printouts. For school."

She motioned with her eye towards the counter. – "Put them down."

"Okay."

He did as she asked – no, ordered –, yet she still didn't budge. No attempt to cover herself up, nothing.

"What?" – she asked after a second.

"You're naked." – Kaworu replied.

"So?"
"And I'm standing right here."

"Are you bothered by my current state of undress?"

"Aren't you?"

"Should I?"

"...I don't know that much about girls." – he admitted. – "But I'm pretty sure if I were to look at them while they were naked, they would scream. And yell at me. Possibly slap me too."

"You did not attempt to molest or sexually assault me." – Rei replied, turning away from him. – "Therefore, no retaliatory action is warranted at this time. I do not recommend for you to provoke such action either."

"I'm not the pervert type." – he called out as she passed through a door at the far end of the kitchen, directly opposite of the entrance.

"I know."

"How?"

"You are not aroused." – It was a matter-of-fact statement, not a question. And it was true.

With nothing to do, Kaworu followed her but stopped at the threshold of her room. It had to have been her room, as her coat hung from the back of a chair. He didn't know what a girl's room was supposed to like but the almost spartan furnishing was something he didn't expect. No posters, no decoration, nothing. Just a bed, several dressers, a large, military-style crate in the corner, and a desk with a blaring music player and an assortment of books. Most of the books were titled with characters he had never seen before. That included a large stack of doorstoppers on the ground next to the desk, with the topmost one bearing דומלת in place of a title. Of the ones that were titled in English, he spotted multiple dictionaries and thesauruses for modern, medieval and ancient Hebrew, as well as something called Aramaic.

Except it wasn't just the books that seemed unusual. Lined up on her desk in an orderly fashion were several dozen knives, a sword in a scabbard, and two black revolvers with wooden grips, accompanied by speedloaders carrying some rather large bullets.

As Rei walked to one of the dressers, Kaworu's eyes were immediately drawn to the dark spot on her left arm, just below the shoulder. A tattoo, composed of ten circles and 22 lines connecting them.

"Where did you-"

No further sound could leave his lips before she was there.

He didn't see her move, or even begin to move. One moment, she was about to walk through the door opposite of him; the next, she was less than a meter away from him.

He similarly didn't see her hand before it latched onto his face and brutally smashed it against the wall, making him lose his bearings for a moment. Only distantly did he feel his legs getting swept out from under him before he was jolted back to awareness by a rough landing on his back, followed by a weight on his chest pushing all air out of his lungs.

Kaworu assessed his situation. She didn't simply knock him to the floor but followed him down as
well, her naked rear currently resting his chest. And she wasn't straddling him, either: her lower body was twisted sideways with near-impossible flexibility, left leg clamped around his thighs in a vice grip, right leg hugging his right shoulder and clavicle to keep him from leaning away or twisting himself free. Her hand was still latched onto his face as well, along with the sensation of something metallic pressing into his temple.

All in all, he was well and truly immobilized. The part of his brain that wondered about her disinterest at being seen nude absently noted that the position they were in happened to give him a prime bottom view of her right breast as well.

"You did not see any kind of mark on my body." – she said, voice barely more than a whisper. – "Do not ask about it again, even in private. Forget ever having seen anything. If you will not do as I say, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

'Kinda hard to forget something that gives me bruises.' Kaworu thought silently but knew she wouldn't accept that as an answer. There was something in her eyes that warned him she wasn't kidding or exaggerating.

As soon as she had the answer she wanted, Rei abruptly got off him and yanked him to his feet before practically showing him outside through the still-open entrance door and slamming it behind him. Thus, as a thoroughly confused Kaworu got into the elevator once more, he couldn't see the girl resting her back against the door as she closed her eyes and let out a sigh.

A minute later, she opened her eyes to stare at the palm she grabbed his face with. – "That feeling..."

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Two hours later, Kaworu let out a similar sigh as he scooped up water from around him and threw it into his face before leaning back in the bathtub.

At least this apartment had running water – and warm running water at that –, unlike his previous one. But then again, the whole building of his previous apartment was in dire need of a complete structural overhaul; Kaworu still remembered that one night two years ago when he was abruptly woken up by a top floor room's ceiling collapsing in the middle of the night, giving him (and whatever rats happened to be in the building at the time) quite the scare. He could tell from the outer walls almost universally lacking plaster that it was bad, but didn't know just how bad it was until then.

Fortunately, no such incident happened again - and right now, it didn't even matter anymore. The government official who visited him about his expulsion took one look at the building he left at the school as his contact address and immediately had him forcibly evicted; on his last day in Vienna, Kaworu even overheard him mention the building being slated for demolition due to threatening to damage other buildings nearby if it collapses (even though Kaworu knew this particular block was mostly uninhabited, aside from squatters like himself). In other words, he suspected a high chance of him never seeing the building he grew up in, ever again.

Instead, he now had a place that was officially his. It was, admittedly, too big for him, what with having two bedrooms and all. But Kaworu wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, so he didn't complain. The room he claimed for himself wasn't even a proper bedroom; more like a storage closet that happened to have a window. It was even smaller than his old room – but his old room was actually a living room and everything he owned took up only a fraction of it, so the smaller one was just as sufficient. He would've been just as fine with just using the living room like before, except this apartment happened to have a balcony that took up the living room's entire wall, placing him squarely in the center of attention for everyone looking at the balcony from outside.
There was also the fact that, unlike before, he didn't have to go easy on the heating. Upon moving in, Kaworu spent a few moments figuring out the wall thermostat in the living room. He wasn't going to be cold in the winter, which was always good. Gone were the days of him huddled around the old electric heater he salvaged from a nearby scrapyard, along with whatever rags he could use to insulate the windows. He hated winters; not just because of the cold but because of those rags teaching him the lesson that frozen mold, when warmed up, had an absolutely awful stench.

But it wasn't his accommodations that had his mind going at the moment. No, it was the girl who smashed his head against a wall so hard that it still hurt.

Her behavior was, simply put, impossible to figure out. Dressing in a way that makes it hard to tell her gender but not having any trouble with nudity? Completely docile at one moment, then literally a trigger's pull away from taking his life the next? Just what was going on inside that girl's head?

It wasn't even just her behavior that bothered him, but his own as well. Somehow, he had an odd feeling when near her; like something was lurking just beyond the forefront of his thoughts, eluding focus. She felt... familiar. He didn't notice it beforehand but when she stood bare before him, Kaworu inexplicably felt as if he wasn't looking at another person of the opposite gender. Beyond the flesh, he felt as if he was looking at himself in an invisible mirror. There was something about her that made her stand out for him; not her clothing, not her appearance, not her behavior, but something else. He couldn't put it into words but it most definitely wasn't sexual attraction.

Then there was when she grabbed him. The instant her skin touched his, Kaworu felt something like a static discharge. Except... not quite.

She was a complete enigma... one that reminded him of himself.

Sitting up, he shifted his left arm to glance at the tattoo on it: ten circles and 22 lines forming a hexagonal shape, underlined by an alphanumeric string: PrG-AEL_GC2-2027.

While outwardly appearing calm and confident, the truth was that Kaworu Nagisa knew very little about himself. He didn't merely not know his parents; he couldn't remember ever having parents. He couldn't remember anything past the time he was six years old, aside from his own name. Every time he tried to, it was like running into a blank wall.

Even the branding on his arm was a mystery. The number he knew was his year of birth, but the rest escaped him. He asked a multitude of people about the symbol, yet not even any of his teachers could recognize it. And now his most enigmatic classmate turns out to have an identical one she's defensive about.

Kaworu found that fact highly interesting.

Six hours later, the apartment was completely pitch black, the only source of illumination being the street lamps' light seeping in through the windows from below. For his part, Kaworu himself was sleeping face-down on his bed, limbs pointing in every direction underneath the covers.

No sound was made when a shadow separated from the corner and resolved into a human silhouette.

"Report." – the figure spoke with a dry, almost emotionless tone. Kaworu slightly stirred at the sudden sound but didn't wake up.

"No anomalies, my lord." – a bodiless voice replied. – "However, I might not be able to maintain my cover for very long."
"Oh?"

"Those accursed vortigaunts have detected my presence. I'm not certain whether they're fully aware of my nature but they might move against us."

A long silence settled over the room before the figure spoke again. – "...you have doubts."

"My lord, I have been watching over this boy for ten years now. What good is he to us?"

"Do not underestimate his worth. You have seen for yourself what his kind can achieve."

"But he is just a frail mortal. Your previous puppet was only successful because he fought enemies of his own power."

"Except one."

"Which was only a pale imitation of us, unable to project the light of its soul without an external source of energy. Even Sachiel would have been able to vanquish it. What good would a single human, as unusual as he is, be against a true Angel?"

As soon as the last word was spoken, both sides of the conversation went abruptly silent.

On the other side of the city, Rei jerked awake.

"Speak of the Beast." – the Voice murmured. – "He is coming."

The corner of the figure's mouth slightly curled upwards. – "It is time. Everything is prepared."

"Is everything ready, my lord?"

"Proceed as planned."

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**Low Earth orbit**

Same time

"Sir, you'd better see this."

The man in an officer's uniform sealed the straw of his coffee can before heaving himself out of his chair, sailing across the null-gravity environment to finally come to a stop next to the uniformed equipment operator who called out to him. – "What is it?"

"Sensors just picked up an anomalous mass reading near Mars." – the operator replied, pointing at the sonar-like display in front of him. More accurately, at a red spot surrounded by dark blue. He pressed a button and a yellow UNKN caption appeared next to the spot.

"Do we have a visual?"

"No, sir. I don't understand it either: an object with that kind of mass reading should be big enough to be seen at our long-range resolution, yet we can't pick up anything."

"The AI can't see it either." – another operator interjected. – "Reading confirmed but no visual."

The officer raised his head and called out behind him. – "Do we have any civvies out that way?"
"ATC says no." – a third operator replied.

"Then it's probably just some kind of malfunction. Log it and switch to the backup." – the officer ordered before kicking off the wall and towards his chair.

"Yes, sir. Switching to backup now." – The sensor operator pressed a few switches on his console, looked back at the screen and froze. – "Sir... the backup is picking it up too."

Before the officer could reply, the third operator interjected. – "Captain, transmission from the Valencia. Text only. They're asking whether we picked up an anomalous gravimetric reading a moment ago." – His console beeped, drawing his attention back to it. – "Hold on, transmissions from another five ships. They're all asking the same thing." – His console beeped again. – "Sir, White Forest is asking all orbiting vessels for confirmation."

Dozens of millions of kilometers away, a dark shape drifted swiftly through the void, unblinking eye sockets on a bird-like skull staring outward just as silently as the void stared back into them.

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The Hebrew-titled stack next to Rei's desk is the Talmud, an old Judaic religious text dating back to between the second and sixth century. Originally, Jewish religious traditions were purely oral until the Romans looted and destroyed Jerusalem's Second Temple in 70 AD, which prompted the Jews to record this knowledge in written manuscripts to ensure that it won't be lost. The book itself is composed of laws, traditions and interpretations of Biblical texts (from the Old Testament, that is) and is a central piece of Jewish law. An unedited omnibus of the Talmud would be several thousand pages long, hence why Rei has it in several volumes.

The basic layout of Rei's home is the same as in canon, except for one extra bedroom. The extra room is directly opposite of the bathroom, opening from the end of the kitchen (next to the threshold of Rei's room). Kaworu's apartment has the same layout as Misato's in canon; EvaGeeks has the exact floor plan, if it is necessary to get a mental image of how everything is laid out. In this layout, Kaworu uses the same room Shinji did.
When the strip of sunlight leaking through the crack in the curtains crept onto his face, Kaworu's eyes cracked open and immediately squinted. Turning over, he slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position, a bleary groan escaping his lips.

Then his eyes found the alarm clock.

"Aw, shit...!"

He practically threw himself out of bed, scrambling to get a new shirt before he suddenly paused. A few seconds later he sighed and collapsed back onto the bed, his earlier frenzy gone, as his brain caught up remembered a crucial detail that made getting to school moot.

It was Saturday.

With that said, he still pulled himself off the bed after a while. Kaworu was never a light sleeper and right now, he felt like he desperately needed something to help him fully wake up. It wasn't anything unusual for a teenager to have a cup of coffee in the morning... but Kaworu happened to use something much stronger than coffee.

He waddled out into the kitchen, immediately drawing a beeline for the fridge and pulling out a transparent plastic bottle from inside. The boy only took a single gulp before parting from the bottle and exhaling loudly, the home-made 120-proof spirits burning his throat as if it was acid. Ice-cold acid, that is.

Like all teens, the boys of Vienna in Kaworu's age group experimented with things the adults didn't want them to do – which included alcohol. Sometimes a couple of them sat together to share a bottle someone managed to procure from somewhere. It was during these sessions that Kaworu discovered something: for some reason, his alcohol tolerance far exceeded everyone else's. Nothing less than hard liquor could even begin to warm him up - and even then, he managed to drink everyone he ever met under the table without any effort whatsoever. Literally, in some cases; more than once Kaworu found himself sitting alone at said table, with everyone else lying haphazardly on the ground in near-comatose states of inebriation.

On one occasion, he even drank a glass of pure ethanol on a dare. Granted, he almost puked it right back up, but not only he didn't pass out, even the dizziness went away after a few hours.

While he didn't have the funds to maintain a drinking habit (nor did he particularly feel the need to), Kaworu still kept a bottle at home to wake himself up with. He tried coffee, but caffeine just didn't give him a strong enough kick unless he drank eight cups at once... and even then, it barely lasted for an hour. He found it much more effective (and cheap) to buy a bottle of ethanol, pour it into a larger bottle and water it down 3:2. A single bottle tended to last around two weeks.

It was cheaper than proper alcoholic beverages... but tasted absolutely horrible. At least it wasn't denatured; Kaworu really didn't want to repeat the one time he tried that, even if he had a guarantee that it wouldn't mess up his eyesight for nearly a month this time around.
For now, he sealed the bottle and put it back into the fridge before immediately making a beeline for the tap and rinsing his mouth to get rid of the taste and smell. It wouldn't do for him to stink of alcohol in public, after all. Even with no school, Kaworu had plans that involved him going outside.

Plans that were promptly derailed when he reached the hobby electronics store he saw a few days ago and found nobody there.

It wasn't that big of a problem; he could simply come back later. What bothered him is that not only was the store closed despite the opening hours table saying otherwise, so was every other store he had seen. The entire city was deathly quiet, no car noise from anywhere. Even the birds were completely silent.

And in the twenty minutes or so since Kaworu walked out onto the street, he hadn't ran into a single person. He was completely alone.

It was a typical late-September day: sunny with some clouds, but not hot. Yet, a suffocating and oppressive presence hung over the city, making the hairs on his arms and neck stand on their ends. He didn't know why, but he felt... unsettled. It was vaguely similar to how he felt when his vortigaunt teacher examined him, but the nature of the sensation was less alien and more that of... doom.

A deep noise came from somewhere; he couldn't tell from where or from how far away.

Then he saw it. A Gauntlet-class destroyer emerged from behind a cloud, its 325 meter hull gleaming from sunlight before an even brighter flash came from its front. The sound reached the teen almost ten seconds later, the earthshattering roar of the military spacecraft's 155mm spinal coilgun launching its hundred kilogram payload and accompanying plasma trail shaking the electronics store's window even from kilometers away. He couldn't see what it was shooting at... but it became irrelevant very quickly when a beam of light lanced upwards and speared through the ship end-to-end.

The way the smoking destroyer fell from the sky most definitely didn't seem like an exercise to him. Nor did the violent series of secondary explosions rippling across its lateral missile launch tubes, literally blowing the ship into flaming pieces.

With no one around, no one stopped him from taking a stairwell up to its building's roof. And the reason why no one was around became evident once he had a vantage point over the cityscape.

It was a massive humanoid, easily larger than most buildings in the city, descending on one of the forested hillsides hugging the city from everywhere but the south. Disproportionately wide shoulders framed a skull-like face of the same material as the rib-like protrusions on the sides of the main body, the rest of the entity covered in dark green, almost black, skin. While Kaworu was no biologist, he learned enough in school to know that what he was looking at was definitely not of this world. Or from Xen, for that matter. It was surprisingly, shockingly fast for its size.

A series of thundering booms came from the rest of the hills before the entity was suddenly blanketed by explosions, the massed artillery fire obscuring it almost completely. The entity raised its arm almost casually before a beam of light shot out of its palm, the arm moving sideways in a sweeping motion for several moments before the beam cut out, a trail of fire left in its wake. Kaworu noticed the number of explosions on the entity decreasing significantly.

Then the low rumbling he's been hearing since the street became almost deafening, a shadow fell over him... then the entity was completely covered in clouds of shrapnel as the 96-meter Ezekiel-class barely a hundred meters above Kaworu unleashed a full barrage. A single fragmentation shell
designed against aircraft wouldn't be much of a threat against a single target on the ground – but when 24 double-barreled turrets all simultaneously open fire at the same target at 300 rounds per minute per turret, the result is something else entirely. Unfortunately for Kaworu, whoever commanded the ship didn't seem to be satisfied with quantity over quality: the frigate slowed down to a complete halt directly over him, only hovering in one place... then the 90mm spinal coilgun let loose with an extremely loud blast. The aerial shockwave followed only a split second behind, blowing the teen off his feet and literally sending him flying backwards for several meters.

As the frigate slowly edged out of his field of vision, Kaworu just stared motionlessly upward in a daze. High-pitched ringing was the only sound he could hear, along with the sensation of something warm running down his earlobes. It took him almost a whole minute to get his brain into working order and sit up, wincing from the stabbing pain in his ringing ears as he reached up to his ear. His fingertips came away bloody.

Still dazed, he looked at the smoke cloud that blanketed the giant, the frigate still furiously emptying its weapons at it. A bright flash came from inside the smoke and a beam of light shot out, carving a massive gouge into the frigate's side with a glancing hit. The wounded vessel almost fell out of the sky until it managed to stabilize and pulled up before its belly kissed the rooftops, limping away with smoke trailing behind.

Even with such distractions, Kaworu's attention failed to miss the large, partially molten piece of armor that used to be attached to the frigate's side until just a few seconds ago, currently flying on a ballistic course in his general direction.

He tried to urge himself to get up and run, but his shellshocked body didn't feel like responding.

Then the piece of debris was jolted to the side by a powerful impact. Again. And again. It finally crashed into the roof to his left, cracking the concrete and kicking up a sizable dust cloud.

His daze clearing bit by bit, Kaworu's head slowly turned to the right to assess a new development: Rei standing on the edge of the roof, a very large scoped rifle in her hand and three spent shell casings at her feet.

Only when she yanked him up to his feet and dragged him back into the stairwell did his head start to clear out. He realized he had absolutely no idea how she even got onto the roof in the first place, considering that the stairwell door was in his field of vision the whole time and he didn't see her come up that way.

"It is not safe here. Get to a civil defense shelter." – Despite hearing practically nothing of his surroundings, Kaworu could hear Rei's voice plain as day once they got back to the street. The sidewalk on both sides of the street was covered in broken glass, the shockwave of the frigate's coilgun having blown out every single window nearby.

Shaking the last of his dizziness away, Kaworu found that his throat at least was still working. – "Uh... slight problem: I don't know where any of the shelters are."

She glared at him.

"I just moved here!" – he pointed out. – "How could I have known I'd need to go there someday?"

She kept glaring at him.

Kaworu sighed. – "You know what? I'll just go home. I mean, that's got to be safer than out here."

"No time."
"Time for wha-" – he started to ask before she grabbed him by the neck of his shirt and pulled him after her as she broke out into a sprint, glass cracking under her boots.

As they ran, the boy noticed that his companion was moving with a purpose, seemingly headed to a specific location instead of just blindly running. They weren't even backing away from the entity, which was already walking the city's streets; more like moving sideways.

She suddenly let go of him and reached into her pocket to pull out a cellphone; Kaworu's aching ears still couldn't hear it ring. – "It's me."

"Rei, are you in position?"

"Two minutes."

"You ran into a delay?"

She glanced back at him. – "It is nothing. Do we have a go?"

"Unit-00 is arriving to the surface as we speak."

That's when Kaworu spotted an orange speck beyond the rooftops; he couldn't see enough of it to tell what it was, only that it was large. Very large.

When she ran directly into another stairwell, he followed without a word. Taking the stairs two at a time, Rei ran all the way up to the top and shoulder-charged the roof access door without even slowing down; the door gave way with a loud crash and as Kaworu passed by it, he could've sworn that there was a slight indentation in the riveted iron plate.

This building seemed to be a floor or two higher than the one where he met her a few minutes ago – and with the additional height, the orange object he saw above the roofs was right in front of them.

Now having a close look at the object, Kaworu still couldn't tell what exactly it was. All he saw was orange-painted metal. But Rei still didn't slow down and actually reached behind her to grab him by the neck again, this time with a stronger grip. – "Run as fast as you can." – she called out to him. – "Do not hesitate or you will die." He wanted to ask what she intended to do, but the rapidly approaching edge of the roof left him no time for questions.

"Jump!"

He jumped.

After what seemed like an eternity of sailing through the air, Kaworu felt something solid under his feet and almost fell over as inertia kept carrying him forward. Fortunately, the object was more than large enough to arrest his stumble before he fell down and broke his neck on the pavement below.

Catching his breath, he looked back and realized he had no idea how they made the jump: there was a clearance of almost ten meters between the roof and the object, much more than the longest distance he'd ever jumped.

But as he peeked over the edge, he saw a massive, five-fingered hand at street level and it suddenly clicked: the object was a humanoid battleframe, roughly on the same scale as the entity but currently lowered to one knee. The curving wall he could see at roughly the same level as himself was actually the battleframe's slightly pointy head, with what he thought was a vertical pillar actually being the peak of the head lengthened diagonally backwards into a horn. A circular, cyclopean 'eye' crowned
the face, with what looked like a closed mouthpiece beneath it.

With the battleframe in a crouching position, he also got a good look at the enormous hump on its back. It didn't seem like a part of the machine itself, more like something attached like a backpack: it had the general shape of a slightly elongated quarter-sphere with a flat top, the unpainted metallic gray of the hull bearing the distinctive yellow-black trefoil of a radiation warning symbol.

The still-quiet sound of pneumatic hissing reached his ears and he looked in Rei's direction just in time to see her type something into a formerly hidden keypad. Then a large plate between the battleframe's neck and nuclear backpack retracted towards the latter and a large metal cylinder emerged from inside, its top separating and sliding upwards to reveal a hollow interior. All he could see inside was a seat with a white package on it and a pair of control sticks in front of it.

Rei stepped inside and threw an empty plastic bag in his direction. – "Take this." – It was so sudden that Kaworu barely caught it.

"What do I do with this?" – he asked.

In response, Rei slipped out of her coat and threw it at him as well. – "Put these in." The coat was quickly followed by her top, then her shirt, then her boots, then her jeans. Soon enough, she was standing completely naked; Kaworu absentmindedly realized that she didn't throw any underwear his way. With that done, Rei grabbed the white package and promptly ripped it apart, revealing it to be a disposable plastic bag containing clothing made out of a white, rubbery material she immediately started donning in plain sight.

While he was stashing her clothes into the waterproof bag, Kaworu noted to himself a change in Rei. She seemed to behave differently than yesterday. Ever since the roof, she seemed... twitchy, eyes darting around all the time, visibly sweating and even panting slightly. It wasn't from heat and, while she did live quite far from their current location, he suspected she wasn't tired either. More like stressed out by something – almost spooked.

He was broken out of his musings just in time to see her do something at her wrist that caused the material she wore to tighten, becoming a perfectly skintight full-body suit (well, not perfectly skintight; whoever designed it sensibly padded the chest). Without a word, she snatched the bag out of his hand and pushed the air out of it before sealing it.

Then she grabbed his wrist and pretty much shoved him towards the cylinder. – "Get in."

He stepped over the threshold and almost fell on his face when Rei gave him another shove from behind. – "In the seat. Now."

As he settled down, he saw her open a panel just behind the headrest and reach inside to pull out a pair of small, white objects she immediately clipped to her hair, slightly behind the top of her head. Looking at the control sticks in front of him, Kaworu started to wonder whether she wanted him to pilot the battleframe or something; there's no way he would be able to do that.

He got his answer a second later when the girl abruptly sat on his lap, her back firmly pushed against him. She reached behind him and pulled the seatbelts forward, tying both of them into the chair just as the hatch abruptly shut itself, plunging the two into darkness.

It lasted for almost no time before the walls around them erupted into a multicolored display, finally settling on black. Then a glowing holographic rectangle materialized in front of them, containing the image of a woman. Kaworu had never seen her before but it immediately struck him how similar she
looked to Rei. Well, Rei with normal hair and eye colors.

The woman opened her mouth to say something before she paused and looked directly at Kaworu. – "Who is that behind you?"

"Classmate of mine."

"Rei, you are not authorized to bring a civilian into the entry plug!"

"He would've been in the way." – Rei replied simply. – "Lilith, engage Mode 3."

"Understood." – an electronic voice replied from every direction at once.

The walls of the cylinder suddenly started spewing something liquid, rapidly rising from the bottom – which Kaworu found quite alarming. – "Uh... Ikari?"

"What?"

"Something is coming in."

"I know."

"It is oxygenated breathing fluid." – the electronic voice said. – "Do not be alarmed."

Kaworu had nothing to say to that. When the fluid reached mouth height, he saw Rei submerge her face and immediately breathe out, the air bubbling up around her head. The fact that she immediately breathed back in while still "underwater" lent further credence to what he heard, even if he still didn't like it. But he didn't have a choice: in a few seconds, his head was completely submerged and he was left with two options. Breathe the liquid or suffocate. Actually, there was only one option; people can't consciously hold their breath until they pass out and Kaworu wasn't any different in that regard.

At least he didn't puke from the taste. The seatbelt tying him and Rei together was extremely tight, uncomfortably pressing her body firmly into his. It wasn't tight enough to restrict his breathing, but if he found himself having to throw up, he wouldn't be able to do it anywhere but onto her shoulder... and that would be extremely embarrassing. Judging from yesterday's first impression, she already seemed to not like him; throwing up onto her most definitely wouldn't improve things in that regard.

His constitution was further tested by a sudden wave of wrongness washing over him. His entire body broke out into goosebumps with a shiver – but what made him feel sick was the rapidly shifting kaleidoscope of sensations. One moment, he felt like himself, sandwiched between Rei and the chair; the next, he felt like the battleframe, multi-ton armor plates pressing down on his skin as he knelt on the cracked pavement; the next, he felt like Rei, strapped by seatbelts to another body behind him.

For a single instant, he could've sworn that the walls of the cockpit vanished from his sight, leaving only him and Rei floating in a void, the pale skin of their bare bodies shining like the purest light from the blackest darkness.

"Lilith, what's going on?" – Kaworu heard the woman's voice, yanking him back to reality. He more felt than heard a groan of discomfort from Rei as well.

"I am detecting significant signal noise. Correction: I am detecting a non-echoing dual input signal."

"A dual signal? Where is it coming from?"
"I don't know. I am attempting to filter and compensate; however, I estimate a 36% reduction in sync ratio."

The feeling lessened, although Kaworu could still swear he could feel Rei's breathing. And not via physical contact.

"That's too much. We have to abort."

"I can do it." – Rei interjected, her voice slightly weaker than usual. – "Restricting communication to critical-only from this point." – A moment later, the woman's image blinked out.

"Are you alright?" – Lilith asked, concern evident in her tone.

"I can keep going. Main display on."

Kaworu had absolutely no idea what was going on. However, he figured that now wasn't a good time to be obnoxious by demanding an explanation.

Instead, he only asked one question. – "Do you want me to do anything?"

"Only one." – Rei replied curtly. – "Do not get in the way. Lilith, full system and subsystem check."

"Everything is fully operational. Reactor core temperature is at 3000°C, output stable. Evangelion Unit-00, ready for combat."

Kaworu felt his balance shift at the same time as the external view on the cockpit's walls leveled out and rose, signifying the battleframe he currently rode inside the neck of raising its head and standing up, respectively. – "Target information."

"The target made atmospheric reentry over China four hours ago and immediately headed in this direction. All attempts by the military to intercept were unsuccessful. Neither battleframes, nor ship-mounted weaponry inflicted visible damage; based on gun camera footage, the target seems to be protected by a defensive energy field of some kind."

"Nuclear weapons?"

"Multiple tactical warheads were used; no effect. No strategic warheads deployed and our current position makes further attempts unlikely."

"It's got an energy weapon too, I think." – Kaworu spoke up. – "A laser beam or something. I saw it blow a ship out of the sky."

Rei silently nodded at that before turning her attention back to the front. With a slight jolt, the Eva started to move forward at a surprisingly rapid pace, passing by two city blocks before turning a corner to reveal the alien entity standing on the street ahead.

As its armored nemesis approached, the entity turned around and Kaworu could've sworn he saw it take a step backwards. The pressure he felt for a long while was much stronger now, as if someone was physically squeezing his head.

He heard Rei audibly swallow.

"Who are you?"
The voice didn't come from Rei, the woman he had seen earlier, or the electronic voice the other two called Lilith. It just... was, as if someone was talking to him from inside his own head.

*That thing can talk?!!*

Rei didn't seem to hear, nor care, accelerating into a sprinting charge. Apparently taking that as the answer, the entity raised its hand towards its attacker. A glowing spike shot out of the palm, intent on intercepting said attacker via impaling its head.

What happened instead is that Unit-00's head tilted to the side with lightning-fast reflexes, turning the impalement into a glancing blow that carved a deep gouge into the side of its helmet. Not pausing its charge, the orange titan's left hand grabbed its prey's extended wrist and yanked it forward before letting loose a kick with its right leg, hitting where the kidney would be on a human.

But Sachiel wasn't human. An armored boot being planted in its side wasn't quite as painful as it would've been otherwise. Its left hand balled into a fist and swung towards the Eva's head in retaliation. However, Rei wasn't an amateur hand-to-hand fighter either, leaning out of the way of the blow before yanking on the wrist she was still holding. Except instead of just using it to control her opponent's distance, she grabbed the forearm with both hands and brutally twisted in opposite directions, snapping the limb like a twig.

Sachiel roared in pain but had no time to retaliate before the Eva kicked him in the chest and out of arm's reach. A pair of small holes snapped open on the Eva's upper chest and the pair of triple-barreled rotary autocannons opened fire, spitting dozens of 30mm shells at the Angel. Only a few met their mark before an octagonal energy field sprung up in front of the Angel, deflecting the bullets in every direction.

Then the Angel's eyesockets flashed and Kaworu felt like he got hit in the chest by a sledgehammer. He only saw the sky for several seconds before the sensation of weightlessness was replaced by a powerful jolt that painfully bashed his forehead against the back of Rei's head. He half-expected the girl to snap at him, but she didn't say a single word.

"*Is that the best you have?*" – he heard the entity again. It was approaching them slowly, caution evident in its pace.

And cautious it was. When Sachiel came to this world to investigate the strange presence he felt, he did not expect to find a planet populated by Lilim. That in itself wasn't a problem; Lilim grew like weeds and he had his fair share of encounters with their kind before. All Angels had. But to feel a Lilim presence from so far away... that was certainly unusual. None of the planet's native lifeforms felt like that for him. Even from up close, they were but flickering candles before a titanic forest fire at night when compared to him. Scattered among them were entities he never felt before, but the presence didn't emanate from them. No, it was most definitely a Lilim, albeit faint and warped in a way he had never felt before.

What gave him pause was the... *thing* before him. It felt like a Lilim; he could feel the light of its soul as soon as it appeared. But that's where the similarities ended. He felt both normal and warped Lilim presence at the same time, along with Angelic presence as well. It was as if multiple entities resided within the body, which he didn't think was possible. Even the warped Lilim presence wasn't the same as the one that drew him here: it was warped, yes, but not as much. And never before did he see a Lilim on the scale of an Angel. Without the Fruit of Life, Lilim were unable to grow to such size and survive. It was simply impossible, no ifs and buts.

Now he remembered having heard something about anomalous energy emanations coming from this area not very long ago. There was debate over whether to investigate it; in the end, Sammael decided
not to bother. And what Sammael wanted, Sammael got. It was a simple rule to remember, one that gathered the Archangel of Death quite a lot of followers since the recent change of the guard. Yes, times were changing. Traditions that lasted for more time most Angels had been alive were being cast aside, new bonds of power forming between Angels who had been individualistic and indifferent towards each other.

Sometimes Sachiel found himself envious of the family bonds some Angels shared; Shamshel in particular. Maybe if he would've been in her place, he wouldn't be stuck in the position he was in: doing errands for Angels who couldn't be bothered to do so for themselves. But he was weak, weaker than even those soulless Ramiel constructs. If he wanted to avoid being kicked around, he had to do as others said. And what others said frequently involved him enforcing their will on those even weaker than him. He didn't like being kicked around, but he couldn't do anything about it.

At least his usual victims were ones who couldn't fight back against him. It gave him a sense of guilty pleasure to lord over them; he could feel like he was in control, even if it lasted for but a moment. His fellow Angels sometimes accused him of looking down on others only to avoid being looked down upon himself... but Sachiel knew he was looked down upon regardless, so what could be the harm in counting himself among both groups?

"Weakling. No armor will grant you the power to face me."

"Yeah?" – Kaworu retorted. – "How's that arm of yours?"

The entity raised its broken arm, examining the damage. Before Kaworu's eyes, the snapped limb reset itself, flesh knitting back together to remove all traces of the injury. – "Like new."

'Uh oh.'

"Know the name of your better. I am Sachiel. I am your death."

"You're not doing a very good job at that. We're not dead yet."

Rei glanced at him questioningly, but Kaworu only made upward gestures with his hand in response, silently urging her to get the Eva up and standing while he kept stalling.

She seemed to have gotten the message.

"Soon, you will be. Just like all the others who dared to stand against me."

"What did they do to you to deserve death?"

"What does it matter? One insect is as good as another."

"And just what makes you any different?"

"Don't lecture me, armored coward. I had the power to take their lives, just as I have the power to take yours. That is all that matters."

Kaworu's eyes narrowed at that. It was the same, the exact same, reasoning he heard from many bullies throughout his life. To hear this thing, this who-knows-what talk about taking lives for no reason other than because it could... it made his blood boil.

This was it. This was the very end of his patience. Very rarely throughout his life did he ever feel fury of the kind he did right now. He still didn't know what was going on, but he didn't care
anymore. All he cared about right now is ensuring that the target of his wrath suffered a painful death. To dismember it limb by limb, rip off its face and stake the corpse to a mountainside.

But as he opened his mouth to tell the entity just what he thought of it and its excuses, Rei interrupted him. – "Stop talking."

Then she charged.

Sachiel’s arms immediately snapped up at the same time as its face flashed, all three weapons firing at once. Without slowing down, the Eva deftly jumped to the side mid-stride, causing the beams to fly past it and drill through several higher buildings unfortunate enough to be in the way. The Angel couldn’t get off another shot before Unit-00 was already too close and launching a backhand blow.

But Sachiel still had another trick up its sleeve. It jumped backwards at the same time as a vertical ring of light momentarily flashed into existence behind its upper body, launching the Angel into the air and away from its attacker.

Rei wasn’t done, however. Driving its feet into the ground with its own momentum, Unit-00 crouched so deeply that it almost sat down... then launched itself into the air with a grasshopper-like leap, lashing out with its hands to catch the airborne Angel by its ankles. Sachiel had no way to respond before the Eva yanked hard on the ankles, using them as a pivot to twist itself into a forward somersault and drive its heels into the Angel from above, letting go of the ankles at the last moment to quite literally stomp Sachiel right back to the ground. Both combatants were still airborne when Unit-00 fired its chest autocannons again, punching a series of bloody craters into its quarry before the octagonal barrier flickered into existence again.

Unit-00 landed just a second after Sachiel did, the Eva coming down into a perfect three-point landing while the Angel crashed uncontrollably into a building, kicking up a massive dust cloud. – "You will not evade me." – Rei growled.

A split second later, a flash came from inside the cloud and the Eva sidestepped in an almost casual manner, causing the energy beam to miss it by mere centimeters. Its cyclopean head snapping in the direction the attack came from, the Eva’s shoulder racks snapped open and it pulled out a pair of serrated combat knives, the blades coming to life with an ultrasonic shriek.

Sachiel dashed out of the cloud with a roar, blood oozing from the already-healing bullet holes on its body. Both arms lashed out and fired a sustained beam, decapitating several buildings as the furious Angel did a crossing sweep.

Neither of the beams hit their target, however. With inhuman agility and reflexes, the Eva leaned so far backwards that its hump flattened a lamppost, the Angel’s attack sweeping above harmlessly. Then Unit-00 twisted its entire body into a mid-air barrel roll and launched itself back onto its feet.

Sachiel was onto her almost immediately, but Rei wasn’t caught unprepared. As the Angel reached for the Eva’s face, Unit-00 literally slapped the three-fingered hand away before nimbly spinning around and stabbing one of its knives directly into the exposed elbow. Sachiel howled but couldn’t do anything as the Eva continued its spin and swept the Angel’s legs out from under it, finishing up with an upwards slice along the Angel’s leg that sprayed the Eva’s armor with blood.

‘*How do you like being on the other end of the equation, fucker?’* Kaworu thought with a feeling of vindication.

It apparently didn’t. The ring of light flashed beneath the Angel again and it was catapulted off the ground, bodychecking Unit-00 with its entire mass. The pavement tore apart underneath the Eva’s
armored boots as it was pushed back, but it didn't fall. And when Sachiel extended glowing spikes from both of its arms and tried to go for a deadly bear hug with them, the Eva simply kicked its opponent away, flipped both of its knives into a reverse grip and lashed out, simultaneously slicing both of the Angel's arms in half along their entire length.

Through the haze of pain, Sachiel realized his mistake but couldn't back away fast enough before Unit-00 flipped its knives back into normal grips and drove both blades into the Angel's eyesockets. Then it shifted to a reverse grip again and ripped both knives out to the sides with a sickening wet crack and twin sprays of blood.

Sachiel was scared. Very, very scared. But that feeling lasted for barely a split second before Unit-00's chest autocannons opened fire at practically point-blank range, the high-caliber bullets slamming into his core and shattering it. Then he felt nothing anymore, his body limply falling to the ground with a crash that knocked down another cloud of dust before going still.

Unit-00 stood motionlessly over its kill for several minutes, Rei's eyes waiting for even the slightest twitch that could suggest another attack. – "Lilith?" – she asked after a while.

"I've reconfigured my magnetometer during the battle. No electromagnetic field evident of neural activity can be detected anymore."

"Could it be shielding its activity somehow?"

"If it was capable of doing so, it would have done so right from the start. You appear to have killed it."

"It might be feigning." – Rei replied.

'I do not think so. Observe its injuries: regenerative activity has ceased as well.'

Rei kept watching the corpse for several more seconds before she spoke. – "Open a channel to Dogma."

The rectangle with the woman's image appeared again, this time with considerably more worry visible on her features. – "Rei, what's your status?"

"Target has gone silent."

A pause. – "Is it dead?"

"I think so, hakase-dono." – Lilith replied. – "The crystalline formation on the entity's chest appears to have been a vital organ; its destruction caused the entity to collapse and cease all activity."

The woman let out a deep sigh. – "Good work. Are you mobile?"

"Minor joint pain. No externally visible damage detected."

"Alright then. Return to the elevator and come down."

"Understood." – Rei replied.

"And Rei?"

"What is it?"
The woman's eyes looked directly at Kaworu. – "Bring him in with you."

Rei's eyebrow edged upwards at that. – "I was under the impression that he does not have authorization."

"And thanks to you, now he knows too much. We can't let him go just like that."

"Don't I get a say in this?" – Kaworu spoke up.

Rei turned around on his lap and both women glared at him.

"...never mind."

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A critical mistake I've made while writing the original version of this story was not consulting a calendar. September 28 will indeed fall on a Saturday in 2041, a fact I only noticed after I wrote this chapter back in 2012. Afterwards, I decided to just ignore it and keep writing with a one-day shift from the real-world calendar (as this story doesn't take place in the real world, hence specific dates don't necessarily fall on the same day) but now that I had the chance to correct it, I did.

Regarding Kaworu's eyesight issues with denatured alcohol: denatured alcohol commonly contains methanol, which gets metabolized by the liver into formaldehyde, then the formaldehyde is metabolized into formic acid. Formic acid is so destructive to the optic nerve that even 10 mL of pure methanol is enough to cause permanent blindness. It CAN be counteracted with ethanol (that is, alcohol) because ethanol binds to the same enzymes as methanol does and prevents the latter from being metabolized before it's flushed out of the body, but it is still very much inadvisable to consume methanol in any quantities. Kaworu can get away with it because he's a special case, but don't try this after him because YOUR optic nerve most definitely won't regenerate.

The 155mm caliber used by the coilguns of the Confederacy's Gauntlet-class destroyers is roughly the same caliber as the current NATO standard for solid-shell artillery weapons. The Gauntlet-class guided missile destroyer is the Confederate fleet's mainstay powerhouse, designed for long-range combat. While it does have the coilgun and a quartet of conventional gun turrets, its primary weapons are long-range anti-ship cruise missiles fired from broadside horizontal launch tubes, fundamentally similar to the Vertical Launch System used on current naval vessels. These launch tubes are covered by retractable armored shutters in order to avoid an unlucky hit potentially setting off destructive secondary explosions (as demonstrated by Sachiel in this chapter); these shutters are retracted when the destroyer is in firing position. Because of its vulnerability to being flanked and broadsided causing ammunition explosions, the Gauntlet-class is not a frontline combatant but instead launches its missiles from maximum range. The destroyer's coilgun is also capable of orbital bombardment by loading special shells designed to survive atmospheric reentry heat.

The Ezekiel-class frigate is the smallest carrier-independent combat vessel used in the Confederate fleet. Aside from its 90mm light coilgun, it has no weaponry for engaging targets as large as itself – but that's not its role anyway. Instead, the Ezekiel-class is designed purely for close-in defense of larger ships, being outfitted with a large array of autocannons firing proximity-fused fragmentation shells suitable for destroying small, high-speed targets by launching so much shrapnel in their general direction that the target can't possibly evade all of them. Aside from anti-
Ezekiels are also commonly used as pickets.

In the Talmud, Sammael is the archangel of death, ruling over the fifth heaven but residing in the seventh. He is a member of the heavenly host – that is, the army of angels commanded by archangel Michael –, but the number of angels he rules over is unclear. Sammael nominally serves God but tempts men into evil and is often tasked with destructive duties. He is described to have a height equivalent to a distance that takes five hundred years to walk, and is covered from head to toes (implying that he's humanoid) in glaring eyes; his mere sight scares the shit out of Moses during his ascension to heaven. Some Kabbalistic texts however identify Sammael as the serpent who tempted Eve into sin, impregnated her with Cain, then became the spouse of Adam's first wife Lilith and sired several demons (that is, Lilim) with her before God, fearing that their demonic offspring would overrun the earth, castrated Sammael and cast him down to hell. This, however, might be a mistake by demonologists who confused him with Azazel. Sammael is not officially recognized by the Roman Catholic Church due to their refusal to venerate angels not in the Bible.
Chapter 7

Unknown location
September 28, 2041
1322 hours

'What did I get myself into...?'

Kaworu Nagisa was at a complete loss.

When he woke up barely an hour and a half ago, he expected a normal day in a normal weekend. And his definition of 'normal', no matter how cool he knew Kensuke would've found such a thing, most definitely did not include being almost struck deaf, flattened, caught up in a battle between a building-sized monster and a giant robot... ending with said giant robot descending into the ground on a gigantic cargo elevator he couldn't see when he boarded said giant robot in the first place.

Now all he saw outside was darkness, the Eva plunging downwards at such an acceleration that he could barely even feel gravity. Almost immediately after they started descending, Rei undid the seatbelts tying them together and got off his lap, settling down onto the cockpit seat's raised section between his legs. That was where she sat even now, legs pulled up and chin resting on her knees, eyes closed in an almost meditative manner.

"You seem satisfied." – he suddenly heard Lilith remark, causing his head to perk up. – "Yes, I'm talking to you, young man."

"Uh, no. No, I'm just..." – He paused. – "Well, I guess I kinda am. At least that thing got what was coming for him."

"What do you mean?" – Rei asked, one eye cracking open.

"He was like a bully on a playground: hurting weaker people just because he could." – the boy mused. – "He wasn't human, sure; I have no idea what that thing was. But I've seen a lot of people like that, and he wasn't any different. Except in this case, he didn't settle with just hurting people. He killed people. How many did it kill? Not just the soldiers who tried to stop him; I don't know where he came from, but who's to say he didn't walk through a couple of towns on the way here? How many more it could've killed if you hadn't done it in first? I don't know. You probably don't know either. And I guess we'll never know now, because his luck ran out when he ran into someone of his own size." – He chuckled and reached up to pat the top of the cockpit. – "Bet he wasn't expecting this."

"I see." – was all she said before closing her eye once more.

The silence was almost deafening. His ears still weren't 100%; Kaworu guessed he could only hear because of the liquid he was submerged in carrying sound better, or something. At least they weren't bleeding anymore; whatever mechanism filled the cockpit with liquid also seemed to have filtered out the blood that leaked out of his ears in the meantime, so his head wasn't surrounded by a faint red cloud like before.

"You know... I never would've taken you as the pilot of a giant robot."

"Not robot. Cyborg."

"...right."
He had no idea what she meant by that. Then again, he had no idea about a lot of things that happened today.

One of which has been particularly bugging him for a while now. – "Something doesn't add up, though."

"What?"

"How did you find me on the roof?" – Kaworu asked. – "I mean, I was going to a store when I saw that destroyer being blown out of the sky and went up to the roof. But the place where we picked this thing up, and your place... that street wasn't between them. What were you doing there? Hell, how did you even know I was up there?"

"None of your business." – she replied immediately, her voice carrying an audible edge.

After yesterday, Kaworu knew better not to press an issue Rei Ikari did not want to talk about. – 
"...fine. Where are we going, anyway?"

"We are almost there." – Lilith replied.

"Where?" – As soon as the word left his lips, he felt their descent start to slow, gravity returning with vengeance. Rei got up and sat back into his lap. – "Do you want me to get out of the chair?" – he asked over her shoulder.

"Please do not stand up in the entry plug while the Evangelion is in motion. It is unsafe, due to dangerously high g-forces."

"Okay, okay. No getting up then, I guess."

They kept descending for several more minutes before the elevator finally stopped. – "Main screen on." – Rei ordered.

The cockpit's walls around them suddenly lighted up, causing Kaworu to realize that they switched off sometime during the elevator ride. What he saw outside, however, was the absolute last thing he expected.

"What in the..."

A green landscape spread around them, hills and forests everywhere he could see. He even saw a lake.

"Aren't we underground?" – he asked, flabbergasted.

"We are." – Rei replied curtly, Unit-00 starting to walk.

Puzzled, Kaworu looked up... and spotted the roof above them. Very, very high above them.

"How deep are we?"

"We are approximately nine kilometers below sea level."

It was like he entered an entirely different world. Instead of a blue sky, he saw gray rock (at least he thought it was rock – or maybe concrete). But there were clouds, that was no mistake. Genuine, honest-to-god white clouds above them, coupled with a circular formation of blindingly bright light sources near the top that illuminated the whole cavern. If he didn't look up, he never would've
thought that he wasn't standing under the sun.

And those clouds were very much real, considering that they cast real shadows onto the landscape. The landscape, which also seemed to be something he'd normally see outside: forested hill just like the ones outside the city, broken up by grassy fields.

It was completely surreal... and yet, it suddenly made sense. – "...so this is why Kensuke couldn't find this place..." – he murmured.

"Beg your pardon?" – Lilith asked.

"One of our classmates – Ikari's and mine – said there was a research institute or something in the city but he couldn't find it. Said every building owned by the company was too small for the number of people who work there." – He paused. – "I guess that means you work for them?"

"I'm afraid we cannot answer that question at this time."

Twenty minutes later, Kaworu wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer anymore.

Unit-00 walked to an obviously man-made structure in the shape of a pyramid, bearing the large logo of a DNA strand shaped like an infinity symbol. Kaworu only needed to look at the inscription ARTIFICIAL EVOLUTION LABORATORY below and around the logo to have his answer.

From there, they descended through a diagonal shaft and eventually reached a large hangar, the Eva standing into a frame that snapped onto its limbs. He saw a walkway descending in front of them just before the walls darkened and he felt a powerful jolt. Then the cockpit's top opened and Kaworu suddenly found himself back in air.

Rei seemed to be used to spitting the breathing fluid back out... but he wasn't. By the time he finished coughing all of it up, Kaworu honestly felt like being on the verge of spitting out his lungs.

That was before he looked up and saw the armed security guards surrounded him.

As he was led down a maze of corridors, surrounded on all sides by guards watching his every move, he had a feeling it wouldn't be wise to prod them about where they were taking him.

Finally he found himself shoved into a chair. Only now did Kaworu take a full stock of his current situation: he was who-the-hell-knows where, surrounded by who-the-he-knows whom, wanting to do who-the-hell-knows what with him.

This was definitely not what he woke up for that day.

The room looked uncomfortably close to interrogation rooms he saw in some movies, which didn't particularly serve to calm him down. At least his escorts weren't hovering around him anymore, all but two of them having retreated outside.

Which left him with the labcoated woman he saw earlier, sitting across the table in front of him. Rei stood to her right, one arm reaching behind her back to grasp the other. Even as he watched, a drop of breathing fluid detached from her wet hair, landing on the girl's chest. On the labcoated woman's left side stood a younger-looking woman in a brown uniform, currently typing on a tablet.

Eyes locking onto him, Labcoat said something Kaworu didn't quite hear.

"Um, could you speak a bit louder? I can't hear well; my ear hurts."
"He has eardrum injury." – Rei spoke up. Again, her voice was much clearer than the others' for some reason.

Labcoat immediately turned towards her at that. – "And you were waiting to tell me when?" – she asked in a none-too-pleased tone.

"It did not appear to impair him so far."

Labcoat sighed. – "Maya, let the infirmary know."

"Yes, ma'am." – the uniformed one answered.

With that, Labcoat turned back to him. – "As I was saying, I am dr. Yui Ikari, chairwoman of the Artificial Evolution Laboratory. I apologize for the manner of your arrival but I didn't want to take any chances."

"I get the feeling you're not happy about me being here." – Kaworu replied, the woman striking him as someone who wasn't interested in small talk.

"It's nothing personal. But you are here for a reason." – She shifted in the chair, folding her arms in front of her. – "The question is... what do I do with you?"

"Me?"

"I hope you didn't think this was a game or something like that. You have seen and heard things you were not supposed to. Classified company secrets. Secrets we cannot let you tell anyone."

There was nothing in that statement he didn't expect. – "So... you think I would tell someone?"

"Wrong question. Why wouldn't you? How would I know that you wouldn't? What's the guarantee?"

Kaworu opened his mouth to reply... and closed it after a few moments, realizing that she honestly had a point there.

She seemed to have noticed his hesitation as well. – "Do you see the position you've put me into now? You represent a security breach."

"Who would even believe me?" – he pointed out.

"Word of mouth can travel a long way." – she replied. – "It might even reach the exact people I want to keep this a secret from. I can't take that chance."

"I get it, but what do you want me to do? I can't brainwash myself, you know."

"Some say the best solution to a problem is the simplest one. In this case, the simplest solution is ensuring that you will not be talking about anything to anyone." – Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. – "Ever again."

Kaworu could've sworn the room felt a shade colder. – "...I'd rather you wouldn't pick that option."

"Corporate politics can be cutthroat. But I don't make a habit out of ordering the deaths of children. Not even children like you."

"What do you mean?"
"I looked you up in the public records. Kaworu Nagisa, fourteen years old. Born in 2027, exact date of birth unknown, parents unknown. No known relatives, legal guardians or other associates." – she recited from memory. – "In short, you are nobody. You haven't been in this city for even a week, and no one in Vienna expects to see you again either. If you were to disappear, no one will ever know. However, I would rather refrain from making you disappear unless there is no other option. I merely want you to be aware of the worst-case scenario."

"I'm aware of it now." – Kaworu said, swallowing to wet his dry throat. He absently noticed from the corner of his eye the uniformed woman to Yui's left suddenly halting her typing, visibly surprised at something on the tablet's screen.

"Good. However, we are not in kindergarten anymore. A simple assurance that you will stay silent is not enough."

"Do you want me to sign something that says I won't tell a soul?"

A faint smirk appeared in the corner of her mouth. – "You catch on quick. That is another option, yes. However, your trustworthiness is still at question."

"Hakase-dono, if I may..." – Lilith interjected suddenly, her voice emerging from the tablet in the uniformed woman's hand.

"Yes?" – Yui prompted, looking up at the ceiling.

"I have a proposition, although I need to confirm a theory first."

"About what? Now isn't the time for this."

"As soon as my preliminary damage assessment is complete, may I have Nagisa-kun in my entry plug?"

Kaworu saw Yui's eyebrow raise at that. – "What for?"

"Just a brief experiment."

Yui Ikari learned long ago that Lilith never asked something for no reason.

When she saw the boy in Unit-00's entry plug, Yui already felt the beginnings of a headache. She did not want to deal with this kind of situation and made a mental note to question Rei's decision of bringing him inside. Giving the girl considerable leeway and freedom as she grew up (which wasn't exactly by choice on Yui's part) was one thing, letting her compromise operational security was another. But now Lilith was specifically asking for him. That, to put it mildly, was unusual. And Yui was a scientist to the core: to her, the unusual kept festering in her head until she went to the bottom of it, either to investigate or to disprove. Especially if it had something to do with her flagship project, the one she poured a considerable part of her life into.

Another thing that unsettled her was the persistent itch of familiarity in the back of her mind when she looked at him. It's as if she had already met him before, even though she couldn't quite recall it.

"Do you want me to do something?" – Kaworu asked on the screen in front of her, looking around uncertainly. The entry plug was already loaded with him inside, Yui watching from the observation room to ensure he didn't try anything. Not that she absolutely had to, as the guards kept watching him from the catwalk until he boarded Unit-00. He wouldn't be able to try and hijack the Evangelion
either, as Lilith would instantly lock everything down if he were to try.

"Yes. Sit still and don't touch anything."

It was blunt and probably offensive, she knew. But she didn't do what Lilith asked out of charity; she wanted to get this over with and send everyone back to work.

Besides, being a bit hard on him might make him slip up and reveal affiliations to someone. One could never know, after all.

"Synchronization stable." – Lilith reported. – "That is... surprising, but expected."

Not to Yui, it wasn't. Not with an AI feeling the need to point it out. – "What do you mean?"

"I am still using Rei's synchro-profile."

That got the scientist's attention. – "You mean to tell me that he can synchronize with you without you being reconfigured for him?"

"It seems his neural pattern is almost identical to Rei's, below noise filter limits. I don't know how that is possible."

"That... is interesting." – Yui murmured, gears in her head starting to turn in contemplation.

"It also confirms my theory that he was the source of the anomalous signal noise earlier."

Lilith continued. – "The neural interface picked up his pattern and confused it with Rei's. As he was not wearing neural clips, his signal was not strong enough to affect the command interpreter, but sensory information might have been transmitted."

That provided the woman with a few additional pieces of the puzzle. Not enough by any means, but it was something. – "I see. Thank you."

"With this evidence, I wish to propose a solution that will allow us to plug in the potential security leak he represents, maximize his potential usefulness to us, as well as provide him with an incentive to cooperate, all at once."

"Which is?"

"Hire him."

Both of Yui's eyebrows instantly shot up at that. – "You mean as a test pilot?"

"He has the aptitude and the equipment requires minimal recalibration for him. The rest can be taught in the meantime."

"But Unit-02 is not ready yet. Did you mean we train him in the meantime?"

"No. I propose we reactivate Unit-01."

Yui spent a long time digesting that, index finger drumming on the terminal next to her while her mind worked behind closed eyes. As much as it sounded borderline ridiculous to all but reward the boy for being somewhere he shouldn't have been, Lilith's reasoning was sound: he was more likely to keep his mouth shut if he got something out of it himself. It was simple human nature she always took into account during her dealings in the past.
Of course, those deals never involved someone with no training, experience or even academic expertise getting hired straight into such a high position straight away. Normally she wouldn't have even considered it... but to refuse it would've been nepotism, considering that Rei didn't have those qualifications when she started, yet she still got the position and did very well at it.

Almost too well. Even Yui, the one who created it, had no idea that Unit-00 was capable of such agility. Then again, it never operated outdoors before.

"Nagisa, did you hear?" – Yui asked finally.

"Yeah- I mean, yes." – he replied, caught off-guard by the sudden question.

"Do you find that acceptable?"

"Exactly what?"

"In exchange for your silence, we offer you to work for us. Part-time employment with full-time benefits, including salary."

"Salary?"

Yui stated a six-digit number that caused Kaworu's eyebrows to rise. – "Per month." – she added, causing his eyes to nearly pop out of their sockets. – "It's the same amount Rei makes, plus hazard pay, if applicable. If any government official asks questions about the large sum of credits flowing your way, let me know and I'll have my lawyers sort it out. The amount is non-negotiable, take it or leave it."

"Uh, no! I mean, I don't have a problem with the amount!"

"Do you accept, then?"

He shrugged. – "Guess it's better than you giving me the 'offer you can't refuse' shtick."

"Good. We'll get started immediately. First, report to the infirmary for a full medical examination."

"Can I at least get a change of clothes from home?" – he asked, glancing at his surroundings. – "I mean, I kinda stink from sitting in this stuff."

"We have laundry facilities. You will be given clothing at the infirmary in the meantime."

"Oh. Okay. So, um... how long are those tests going to take?"

"Overnight."

"Do you want me to perform his profiling now, then?" – Lilith asked, cutting off her newest colleague’s incredulous question.

Yui nodded. – "No sense in wasting time. We'll get on it after his checkup."

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Three hours later

Yui leaned back into her chair with a sigh. The massive room barely had any illumination save for the set of windows taking up the wall behind her and the faintly glowing lines carved into the floor and ceiling. Aside from her desk, no furniture was present. Originally, the room was to be used for storage but after the restructuring that took place in 2031 – including one she was involved in
personally –, she took it as her personal office. The control center's upper deck was too noisy to do paperwork, what with the dozens of technicians working on the lower levels.

Her position also came with the nice bonus of her being able to put some personal touch into her workspace without anyone second-guessing. Namely, the aforementioned glowing diagrams carved into the floor and ceiling.

While the room was located in an underground laboratory complex, Yui didn't think for a moment it should look like a doom-and-gloom past-century nuclear shelter, as most terrestrial and off-world military installations did. Impressions are everything, and Yui was among the people who believed the future should look futuristic.

Not that many of her subordinates ever saw it. Only a few had reasons to ever come here that didn't include them having screwed up. The crane crew who almost killed themselves a few days ago found that out the hard way. Yui didn't yell at them; she had no need. She could plainly tell how badly spooked all of them were; not just from having been called up to her office, but also because they knew very well how close they came to being turned to a bloody smear on the hangar's walls by reactive armor misfire. Fortunately though, none of them died; any coroner worth their salary would've been able to identify shrapnel wounds and notify the police, with an investigation potentially threatening with another security breach.

"Maya, is the status report complete?"

The technician standing before her desk looked at her tablet. – "Unit-00 is back in Hangar 2. Damage assessment is complete: moderate damage to the helmet and chest armor, but no penetration. Minor joint abrasion, but nothing serious enough to need extra attention."

"So it won't need a full crew?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good. I want Hangar 3 to initiate thaw procedures."

The technician looked up at that. – "We are thawing Unit-01?" – she asked with surprise.

"Yes. How soon can we get it operational?"

"Tomorrow at the earliest, if we go as fast as we safely can."

"Then let them begin immediately and continue to work overnight. I'll give double pay for the overtime, but I want it online and operational by morning."

"I'll let them know, ma'am. But..." – She trailed off uncertainly.

"Yes?" – Yui prompted. She knew better than to dismiss a subordinate who had something to add. Not just because it might give her something useful, but also because it improved worker morale and thus, productivity.

"I think you already noticed but I felt I should bring it to your attention anyway. Repairs to Unit-00, the reactivation of Unit-01 and the ongoing work on Unit-02 is seriously going to stretch our budget. This department eats over 90% of our expenses, yet we're already behind schedule as it is."

"I know, but Unit-02 is almost complete. I intend to take it to the spring expo when we disclose the project. Then all of our work so far will have been worth it."
The younger woman glanced to the side, uncertainty evident on her features. – "I don't know, ma'am... What if we can't convince them? They might judge it too expensive."

"Remember, Maya: money has no intrinsic value but what humans assign to it. Sometimes the results are more important than the expenses. If expenses would be all that matters, who's to say our ancestors would still have developed things like nuclear weapons or space travel?" – With that, Yui turned around and gazed outside through the window behind her desk. – "I won't keep you any longer. You have duties to attend to."

"Of course, ma'am. I'll get to it right away." – Maya replied with a small bow before heading for the door.

After her unofficial right-hand woman left, Yui spent the next minute slowly tapping her chair's armrest with her index finger, deep in contemplation. Reaching a decision, she reached out and made a decisive tap on her desk. A slightly tilted holographic rectangle materialized in front of her, the panel covering the desktop itself withdrawing to reveal a keyboard. Leaning forward, she got to work.

"MAGI, I need a file transfer."

"Recipient?" – came the question from her desk.

"Confederate Military Headquarters, White Forest. Attach this file."

"Please wait... Classified content detected. This action may violate company security protocols. Confirm action?"

"Do it."

With that, she leaned back and steepled her hands in front of her face. 'This is it. The die is cast.'

Almost exactly five minutes later, her console chimed. – "Doctor Ikari, your attention is required. The file transfer recipient requires your immediate telepresence."

"Put me through." – At that, several cameras popped out of the desk. – "Lock my office and mute all messages."

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In canon, the Black Moon is a sphere with a diameter of 13.75 km (over twice the length of Lake Ashi), although only the topmost 900m section is excavated into the Geofront. Here, the entire top half is hollowed out, creating a hemispherical cavern with a floor surface of 148.5 square kilometers. For perspective, it is more than large enough to fit the entirety of canon!Tokyo-3 several times over, with room to spare.
In a closed, windowless room, a large table was surrounded by a number of uniformed military officers engrossed in conversation. Holograms of images and recordings passed between them as they discussed the contents in hushed voices.

They went silent at the sight of Yui's hologram materializing above the table. – "Good day, gentlemen."

At the head of the table, a man well in his sixties and a massive, faded scar on the left side of his face returned the greeting with a nod. – "Doctor Ikari. Thank you for answering our summons. You probably know what this is about."

"Indeed I do, Commander-in-Chief Calhoun." – Yui replied, eyes spotting the six-starred insignia on his uniform's collar. – "I take it that data packet got your attention?"

"Technical readouts for the unknown combatant spotted in Tokyo-2. To put it mildly, we were wondering how you came into possession of that data... though I have a feeling I already know the answer."

"Your suspicion is entirely correct. The object belongs to our company."

Murmurs started around the table, the officers whispering among each other before Calhoun raised his hand to silence them. – "And how exactly did you come into possession of that toy?"

Yui smirked at that. – "We built it, of course."

"We're not here for your amusement, doctor." – one of the officers in the room growled, collar bearing the three-star insignia of a rear admiral. – "Either get to the point or go back to playing with your syringes."

"Pipe down, Sokolov." – Calhoun ordered before turning back to Yui. – "Try again. A biotech company wouldn't have the resources to build a battleframe of that scale."

"It's not a battleframe. The Evangelion is a cybernetic combat platform partly based on Combine synth technology."

That statement set off a massive storm of outrage as if she had just admitted to committing blasphemy. To some extent, she did: research involving the technology of the conglomeration of extradimensional alien races that invaded and conquered Earth in the Seven Hour War during Second Impact was strictly regulated. Some, like graphene-based computing architectures, were widely used; others, like everything involving dark energy, were outright banned. Synth research in particular was a controversial topic. Not just because of the many lives lost to Combine synths during Second Impact and the Great Revolution, but also because of the moral quandary regarding their nature. Simply put, humanity had enough bad experience with malevolent aliens; enslaving other lifeforms, lobotomizing them, cramming their bodies full of cybernetics to the point they are more machine than alive and using them as mass-produced weapon platforms in place of heavy vehicles was anything but benevolent. Especially with the adults still vividly remembering the ultimate perversion of the human body that was the nightmarish Stalker: a barely living hulk, little more than a
skeleton with skin and metal limbs. As Friedrich Nietzsche once said, 'he who fights monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster' – and humanity did not want to risk winning their freedom at that cost.

Another ban stemmed out of simple pragmatism: everyone knew how a sample of ultra-pure xenium caused Second Impact. It was a no-brainer that xenium would end up classified as Class 1.7 Quantum Explosive and Class 7.2 Non-radioactive Nuclear Material; in layman's terms, unlawful possession was legally punishable with up to and including a life sentence. On the other hand, the exotic material's ability to manipulate space-time made it the Holy Grail of teleportation technology and FTL research, two fields in which humanity far surpassed the Combine's level. Use for anything else, however, was forbidden for fear of triggering another invasion. Accordingly, xenium mining operations in Xen were the most heavily regulated, controlled and guarded activity in human space.

Dark energy didn't even get that much use: while a sufficiently-sized dark energy core was basically a perpetual motion machine able to supply the entirety of Earth's electrical needs all by itself, produce abundant amounts of reaction mass for auxiliary dark fusion reactors, as well as dark matter's gravity-canceling property teasing scientists with the prospect of anti-gravity propulsion, the fact that a Citadel-grade reactor could cook off in a dark energy flare rivaling strategic nuclear weapons gave everyone pause. Add in the fact that even trace amounts of dark matter caused detectable distortions in space-time and people and politicians alike screamed to ban the technology – once again, for fear of triggering another invasion.

Not that it prevented the AEL from building a small dark energy core in the depths of the Geofront where gravimetric sensors couldn't detect it that deep inside the planet's gravitational field... but Yui had no intention of crucifying herself by revealing that.

As soon as he could rein in the chaos somewhat, Calhoun asked what everyone in the room was thinking. – "Who authorized you to perform that kind of research?"

"I know what I'm doing. We did not modify any existing organism to create the Evangelions." – It was a partial lie but Yui was fully aware that she was the one holding all the cards here: she knew things they didn't and could choose how much of it she wanted to share.

"As in, plural? How many of these things do you have?"

"Right now? Two. Three months from now, three. One year from now, four. Give me another year and I can start mass-production." – Yui's smirk became borderline smug. – "How many do you need?"

"And what exactly do you intend to do with them?"

"We're a for-profit company. We intend to sell them, of course."

"To whom?"

"To the military. Who else would have the resources and funds to operate them?"

"Your company, apparently." – Calhoun remarked dryly. – "If we truly are your intended buyers, doctor... then how come we haven't been informed of it until now?"

"Because I've done my homework." – Yui shot back, going on the offensive. – "Most proposed weapon designs never obtain enough funding or support precisely because they exist only in the conceptual stage, with no definite results or assurance that they will work. What I am offering you is no mere proposal. It exists, and it works. You've seen it yourself."
"And just what makes you think we wouldn't confiscate such a dangerous weapon?" – he pointed out.

"Nothing. However, we know how it works. You don't. Trying to figure it out yourself would cost you
time, effort and money. We, however, are experts. We worked on this project for years now. We
know everything about it and are offering our expertise."

Yui crossed her arms in front of her. – "We are offering to sell you the ultimate land-based weapon
system – and you are arguing."

She saw Sokolov starting to open his mouth – no doubt intent on telling her to watch her tone –
when the sound of slow clapping echoed across the room. The officers all looked at each other, but
none of them was the source.

That was when Yui's image moved to the side and another hologram materialized next to her: an old,
balding man with a visor over his eyes.

"Ten-hut!" – Calhoun barked. All military personnel in the room immediately jumped to their feet
and saluted.

Keel Lorenz, President of the Confederacy of Man, dismissed his top subordinate with a wave. – "At
ease. Der will be time for pleasantries later. Die AEL has my mandate for performing all of der
current research projects." – he intoned with a strong German accent.

"Of course, sir." – Calhoun replied smoothly and without missing a beat.

"Very good. Now, I would like to have a word with die good doktor myself." – He glanced across the
room and over the other officers. – "I trust you to clean up this... mess."

"Sir, yes sir!" – the generals and admirals of various rank chorused. That's how the highest ranks of
the Confederate military worked: while the commander-in-chief had the metaphorical steering wheel,
the president could override his orders without warning at any time. And it wasn't just de jure
authority either: from the moment Yui saw the room on the other end of the communication link, she
didn't miss the uniformed figure standing behind Calhoun, the small, golden omega symbol in place
of his rank insignia identifying him as a commissar. These political officers of the infamous National
Security Bureau took orders directly from the president and could instantly end anyone's military
career on a whim. Needless to say, neither of the two branches of the military had loyalty problems –
except for a few mavericks who usually ended up getting slapped down very quickly.

Emphasis on 'usually', that is.

As soon as the connection ended, Yui could barely suppress a gulp. She was, for all intents and
purposes, caught red-handed by her highest benefactor.

The same benefactor she was now alone with. Well, alone over a communication link.

"And now, doktor... I believe you owe me an explanation as well." – Keel stated calmly. Yui couldn't
see his eyes behind the visor but she could feel him looking her directly in the eye.

"Not just an explanation, I'm afraid." – she admitted. There was no point in being anything but
honest this time. – "I feel the need to apologize, mister president."

"How so?"
"I'm aware you granted us Sample N-0 for safekeeping and research only. Cloning, modification and weaponization does not fit those categories, I know. But as far as we understand, Project Evangelion is nowhere near the power of the original, so the risk should be greatly reduced. Still, an abuse of your services for us at this magnitude is going too far. I'm sorry." – She bowed her head.

"I see. I will be honest, doktor. This pet project of yours – Evangelion, did you call it? – has attracted my attention. While it is true that your research does not exactly align with your public motives, I am willing to overlook it for now."

That was already more than she expected out of this. – "Sir...?"

"When I look at this technological monstrosity of yours, I see great potential. Mark my words, it shall be the cornerstone of a new age. And I wish to see the coming of this new age, regardless of any obstacles." – He paused. – "Like this... creature, that attacked the city. Der may be further attacks in the future. If der will be... we will need something that can combat this threat." – He looked her directly in the eye. – "Do I make myself clear?"

And there was the catch. – "Well, we'll be quite stretched with both manpower and funds for the foreseeable-

"It was not a request." – he interrupted. – "Suspend your company's other projects and operations, if you must, but make this one your top priority. Unfortunately, I cannot allocate much public funding without raising questions. I believe you do not wish to go public with your operations at this time, correct?"

"If possible, sir. If it comes out that we are developing what are, for all intents and purposes, biological weapons, it could drive investors away."

Keel nodded. – "Understandable. I will make arrangements to provide financial assistance as a black project – but again, I cannot provide much. Make good use of it."

"...yes, sir."

As much as she didn't like being on the disadvantaged side of a deal, Yui recognized long ago that there was always a bigger fish. In this case, the biggest fish there is.

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Geofront, AEL Headquarters
September 29, 2041
0742 hours

Yui paused her typing to sip on her coffee. As much as she was used to doing all-nighters, they still left their toll on her. Especially all-nighters that involved endless negotiating sessions, demanding her brain to run on peak performance all the time. The military weren't making it a secret that they wanted a piece of the project – and as if that wasn't enough, the government jumped into the fray as well, demanding an investigation to find out what else she might be hiding. She had a feeling that the only reason why the facility wasn't crawling with soldiers right now was due to President Lorenz' interference. Yui didn't have anything against having friends in high places – it certainly helped sometimes – but such overt and blatant backing wasn't exactly to her taste.

It made her feel powerless, as if she was only in her position due to riding someone else's back.

At least some things went the way they were expected to. It wasn't even three hours ago that she was notified about the crew reopening Hangar 3, having successfully withdrawn the liquid nitrogen coolant. It cost the company a fortune to convert the hangars into cryochambers, especially due to the
sheer amount of insulation needed to prevent the system from leeching heat from the entire facility. Not just because it would've dropped temperatures nearby to dangerously low levels but also because it wouldn't have been energy-efficient, what with the system being designed to flush that heat out into the Geofront (from where it would get back into the facility through the air ducts).

But everything worked as it was supposed to. The crew were tired but they were about to finish their work draining the cryoprotectants and confirming the lack of cellular damage. The next shift will take it from there with a full system diagnostic, the details of which she was writing out right now.

With her own work about to be done as well, it left her thoughts free to wander.

'Neural pattern almost identical to Rei's... Nagisa, just who exactly are you?'

She brought up a list of company personnel and selected Kaworu's name, bringing up his profile. It didn't contain anything she didn't already know, though she noticed a synchro-profile file now being attached to it. 'Looks like Lilith finished it.' With nothing to see here, Yui scrolled lower and opened his medical profile.

'Physical examination: subject demonstrated above average physical fitness. Significantly above average musculature, reflexes and eyesight. Hearing partially impaired from overpressure-induced ear injury... rate of healing suggests injury is not very recent? Strange... Unusual lack of pigmentation; I saw that... Tattoo on left arm? On a 14 year old? Curious. Those things don't come cheap nowadays and with his background, I doubt he could afford one. Bloodwork summary: above average count of erythrocytes... above average amount of leukocytes, possible leukocytosis... Subject confirmed rarity of sicknesses; maybe that's why.'

She paused at the next line.

'Tentative blood type O, antigen anomalies require further testing...?'

The enigma that was her newest employee grew even further. She knew immediately upon seeing him that he was most likely affected by some kind of genetic disease, maybe an extremely rare form of albinism, that gave him his unusual appearance. And now his blood type couldn't be conclusively identified. Off the top of her head, Yui couldn't name any genetic disorder that caused such a thing, especially with the MAGI being able to cross-reference all online medical records it had access to. Albinism also seemed to be in doubt, as his eye color and lack of photosensitivity didn't add up either.

Nor did the next line she saw. 'This must be a measuring error. There's no way for someone to have that much telomerase and not walk around with half a dozen tumors.'

A small message popped up unexpectedly, informing Yui of something she already expected in a few hours. While the AEL didn't run any human experiments, the MAGI's spare processing cycles were spent sequencing the genome of all employees in search of markers that could hint at dormant allergies and other sicknesses of a genetic origin. Such a technology would definitely be useful in the civilian sector, mainly for pediatricians.

What Yui didn't expect was a single line in the analysis:

**TELOMERE LENGTH: ~5.23 MILLION BASE PAIRS**

"Something is definitely wrong with the equipment." – she murmured, her mind immediately recalling her university lessons. – "Human telomeres are measured in thousands, not millions... not even embryonic stem cells have that much."
The mystery in her mind only grew once she saw the next three lines:

**WARNING: 46,712,461 BASE PAIRS**
**NOT CONSISTENT WITH COMMON HUMAN GENOME**
**VERIFY SAMPLE QUALITY AND EQUIPMENT FUNCTIONALITY**

"Forty-six million? That's too far beyond error tolerance; it can't be a machine error..."

She trailed off in terrible realization as her mind finally connected the dots.

Tattoo on arm.

Abnormally long telomeres.

Altered genome.

Biological anomalies in physiology and physical structure.

Unusual EEG patterns.

It all sounded uncomfortably familiar to the woman. *Bizarrely* so.

Her hands leapt at the keyboard faster than a hungry Antlion at its prey, hammering in credentials to open a secure data vault that laid dormant at the depths of the MAGI's storage units, untouched for the last ten years. – "...let me be wrong... please let me be wrong..." – Submitting the data for analysis, the result was soon displayed to her.

**SMPL_KN – ARCHIV_GC2**
**COMPARISON COMPLETE – 100% MATCH**
**POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION AS SECOND CHILD**

Ever so slowly, Yui's head inched back to lie against the chair's headrest, her eyes closing in resignation. – "...oh my god."

While she appeared calm outside, her mind was in an utter turmoil of emotions. Happiness. Fear. Concern. Shame. It was the absolute worst case scenario, one she had absolutely no solution and no preparations for. On one hand, she was immensely relieved. On the other hand, she was absolutely furious at herself... for several reasons.

'How could I have missed this?! The resemblance is blatantly obvious, why the hell didn't I notice it any sooner?!

Before she could properly formulate her thoughts on the matter, her terminal signaled an incoming call from the internal network. Acting completely on reflex and muscle memory, Yui opened the channel. – "What is it, Maya?"

"We've finished Unit-01's preliminary system diagnost..." – the technician trailed off, seeing her superior's pale face. – "Ma'am... are you alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Yui shook her head. – "It's nothing; continue."

"Umm... as I was saying, the preliminary diagnostics are complete. No problems have been detected." – the technician replied uneasily. – "Are you sure you're alright? I can call someone over, if you wish."
"I'm fine." – Yui insisted. – "Is he operational?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Patch him to my terminal. Also, regarding the diagnostics... let me know when the next shift checks in."

"Understood, ma'am." – The window blinked out, only to be replaced several seconds later by another, displaying only the caption UNIT-01 – SOUND ONLY.

"Can you hear me?"

"Synthetic consciousness interface PrE-SCI-0025_01-ADAM online. Voice print analysis confirmed; authorized user identified. Answer: yes." – came an electronic but noticeably masculine voice.

The corner of Yui's mouth twitched upwards at that. – "Still as eloquent as ever, I see."

It was nothing unexpected. Unlike Lilith, Adam wasn't even a year old at the time he was shut down and cryopreserved. That time wasn't enough for his personality to fully actualize yet, nor was he able to do anything in that regard while "asleep". His awkward and sometimes sesquipedalian manner of speech in particular was still the same one he was initially programmed with. That's not to say he couldn't understand normal speech; it's just that he wasn't familiar with speaking like that himself, hence he fell back to force of pre-programmed habit.

Yet even with the little time they could spend together, Lilith bonded with the younger AI even quicker than she did with Rei, taking him under her metaphorical wings like an elder sister. It was partly because of the facility's human personnel identifying Lilith as his sister that Adam chose to self-identify as male, citing that it reduced ambiguity in conversations about them if they aren't referred to with the same gender-specific pronouns. Or, as Lilith theorized, he might have wanted to be different from her because he respected her too much to elevate himself to the same level as her.

A second window popped up, captioned UNIT-00 – SOUND ONLY. – "I am here as well, hakase-dono. And brother, I am pleased to see you operational once more." – Lilith said, her voice carrying the undertone of a smile.

"Acknowledgment."

Yui's frayed nerves needed a distraction. Something to keep her mind occupied with, something other than her disturbing discovery. Fortunately, she knew just the way to do it. – "Lilith, are you ready for debriefing?"

"I am at your disposal, hakase-dono."

"Adam, I trust you have synchronized your system clock?"

"Acknowledgment."

"Good. Yesterday, an unknown entity similar in scale to Evangelions has appeared and made its way to the city, whereupon Lilith engaged it in combat and killed it. Lilith, what are your observations on the entity?"

"I am unsure. It showed no outward signs of biosynthetic enhancement, yet a land-based creature of such size should not be able to exist naturally. Its humanoid physical structure is
far too inefficient at this scale; a quadrupedal or hexapodal bodily structure would be more efficient. Due to the square-cube law, it should not even be able to move without cybernetic assistance in an atmosphere with similar oxygen content as ours. Presuming, of course, that the entity is an oxygen-breathing lifeform: I detected no activity that would suggest respiration, despite the presence of semi-external organs visually analogous to gills."

"I see... and its capabilities?"

"Just as unusual, Hakase-dono. Its forelimbs contain what appear to be retractable spines that can extend to a significant distance. There is also the high-energy release it appears to utilize as a long-range directed energy weapon. I was unable to measure its cycle time based on the data available but its firepower is troubling: the energy levels required suggest an internal power source of artificial origin."

Yui nodded. – "I concur. Bioelectricity alone cannot account for what must be at least several hundred megawatts."

"Additionally, it seems to possess some form of energy shielding sufficiently powerful to withstand a great deal of punishment. I have observed intermittent activations while I was engaged in combat, although the entity appeared to use it against ranged attacks only. I haven't observed it utilize this field at the same time as it was attacking; it may be possible that it is unable to attack while shielding itself. No infrared signature, radio noise or radiation spike was detected while the shield was active; as such, I cannot even begin to speculate how it works. It might be related to the entity's capability to temporarily neutralize gravity and fly across short distances to traverse difficult terrain and control the distance at which it engages its target; however, the entity's repeated use of ground-based locomotion suggests it might not be able to sustain this ability for long."

"Maybe Earth's gravity is too high for it?" – Yui offered.

"Logic of last statement computes." – Adam piped in. – "Previously stated theory of platform Lilith claims subject cannot naturally evolve and exist in current environment. Correlation might be present."

"Quite so." – Lilith replied. – "There is also one additional factor, although I am not sure how to explain it. During the engagement, Nagisa-kun was repeatedly speaking to an unspecified third party, as if he was in conversation. I also detected anomalous EEG activity in Rei's low-level cerebral functions during pauses. It might be possible the entity was attempting to communicate with Nagisa-kun."

Yui leaned forward slightly. – "What exactly do you mean by ‘anomalous’? Are we talking ESP here?"

"I realize there have been no experimental results in the field of parapsychology within the past century, but it seems beyond coincidence. I believe we should explore the possibility."

While Lilith had no way of knowing, that statement raised even more question marks in Yui's head. It served as an additional confirmation of her suspicions about the boy, yet many more questions remained: what triggered his possession of ESP? How did the process work? And finally, how can an alien creature be compatible with a human brain?
The first one she already knew the answer to, thanks to Rei. The second and third were somewhat harder to crack; vortigaunts were widely known to possess a form of group telepathy and with the proper chemical catalyst are capable of ‘dividing the false veils of the Vortessence’ which some theorized to be astral projection. More unusually, vortigaunts were starting to be employed by the government in judicial procedures to verify testimonies and confirm eyewitness accounts. Then there was their absolute mastery over electricity - to date, no biologist managed to figure out how exactly can a bipedal creature roughly shoulder-height to a human can \textit{throw lightning}, much less do so with enough concussive force to blast a human-sized target back several meters.

The public explanation had been short and simple: bizarre alien biology.

Of which none have been observed in humans. Until now.

Yui took a deep breath to psych herself up for what was coming. It looked like there was no avoiding the topic she wanted to avoid after all. – "Both of you, switch to RSA-4096 and listen well."

With the advent of computer hardware sufficiently powerful to house artificial intelligence, the Confederacy was forced to upgrade their encryption algorithms as any AI could crack the lesser ones in a matter of days, if not hours. What they didn't know was how grave the situation was: upon its first activation, the MAGI summarily cracked every single RSA key in two weeks, without using any existing information on how to do so. Lilith still hasn't managed to crack RSA-2048 but was working on it in her free time.

Fortunately, the MAGI was specifically programmed to not attempt decrypting anything that goes through Yui’s terminal.

"I am listening, hakase-dono."

"Platform ready to receive classified information."

"Alright. I have information regarding Nagisa that you both need to be aware of. Especially you, Adam; he'll be your pilot from now on, so you're going to be working with him." – With a few commands, she forwarded her earlier findings across the secure channel.

It took the AIs a few seconds to process the data burst. – "This... is unexpected indeed." – Lilith noted. – "Did you have foreknowledge of this?"

"No, and that doesn't make me feel any better."

"Probability of specific person meeting specified criteria located at specific location within a specific timeframe negligible." – Adam added. – "Hypothesis: occurrence of specified event not random. Evidence: none."

"I cannot tell how Rei will react if she were to acquire knowledge of this."

"That's precisely why I'm telling you this. I don't want any of you to notice something is off and start asking questions that might tip them off. For the moment, I don't want either of them to know."

"I understand. My lips are sealed." – Lilith assured.

"New operational directive acknowledged. External information cache ARCHIV_GC2 security level changed to confidential, internal memory only. Purging all references in communication logs... Purge complete." – Adam added.
"I'm sorry to have to ask this of you. It's my fault; I made a terrible mistake."

I'm aware Japanese never uses multiple honorifics at the same time; keep in mind however that Lilith is an AI and as such, she's not above inventing her own neologisms. For those not in the know, hakase [博士] is a term for someone with top-tier academic expertise (as in, PhD; the closest western equivalent is 'professor' - in canon, Ritsuko was addressed Akagi-hakase by several characters on the original Japanese voicetrack) while dono [殿] is a deprecated honorific that used to be the proper way to address the speaker's feudal master but is rarely used nowadays due to its lack of self-humbling giving it a level of respect lower than sama; Lilith uses the original meaning. What makes this way of addressing sort-of correct is that hakase, like senpai, can be used on its own, not just as a honorific. In this case, Lilith's use of hakase-dono reflects on her respect and formal recognition of Yui as her creator and is no different than, say, C-3PO saying "Thank the Maker".

The classification mentioned in the context of xenium being designated as hazardous material is the real-life hazard identifier system devised by the United Nations Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods. It is not a scale but rather, it defines what makes a particular material dangerous. Class 1 designates explosive materials, class 7 designates radioactive materials. Subclasses 1.7 and 7.2 are made up (class 1 only has six subdivisions, class 7 has none): 1.7 designates an explosive material that can affect the fabric of spacetime, 7.2 designates a material that only emits ionizing radiation under specific circumstances.

The actual physical properties of xenium are never mentioned in canon, only that it is in-part exotic matter. Mass-wise, it is a transuranic element but it cannot be placed on the periodic table because of its non-baryonic constituent particles. Its crystal structure is stable enough that it cannot explode by conventional means – but zapping it with a high-energy stream of particles will trigger a violent reaction that releases oscillating waves in the fabric of spacetime. Organic tissue, being soft and pliable, isn't affected by it but large, rigid objects rapidly develop structural failures that break concrete and bend steel. This warping effect is what gets harnessed and controlled for wormhole formation.
Chapter 9

*Unknown location*
*September 29, 2041
0236 hours*

The footage of the battle played again. Every observer was silent, their forms digitally obscured by an artificial light-source-behind-body visual effect within the holographic monoliths that served as their avatars. Not one word was said; the images of one giant battling another spoke louder than any words they could've possibly said.

Only when it ended and the form of Unit-00 was isolated and enlarged for everyone to see did those assembled start to discuss what they have witnessed just now.

"It appears our plans may be realized, after all."

"Indeed. The evidence is clear: what transpired today is a sign that the Scrolls were right all along."

"Do we have the resources needed for the project?"

"Yes. Circumstances are different but *die* scriptures are open for interpretation." – announced the monolith marked 01, immediately muting the others. – "Nevertheless, what they say is clear: *die* Others will descend to seek out *die* Source and *die* Children rise to meet them in battle."

"Do we know their identities?"

"Not yet. Our prime candidate is useless, but the Scrolls are clear: the First One is the key. We must wait until we know more before making our move."

"Our numbers have been reduced in the past years. The premature Second Coming has interfered with our plans... and we paid the price for our unpreparedness."

"Yes. Any unexpected eventualities must be dealt with. We must not fail this time... for Breen made sure we will not have another chance."

"Ah, yes... our prodigal son. He wanted to use the Union in our plans. Yet the interference of Gordon Freeman made his efforts useless in the long run: if the Union returns, they will want retribution for our defiance. And if the Scrolls are right, we will be more than prepared to deal with those blasphemers on equal terms."

"There is one unknown factor: the Scrolls told us that Lilith the All-Mother will be residing within the Black Moon. Yet our explorations before Second Impact revealed nothing. Can we complete the project without her?"

This sent the council into quiet deliberation. Finally, 01 spoke again. – "*Die* Scrolls are open to interpretation. Our intervention at this time is unnecessary; we will have to make sure *die* Evangelions can fulfill their task as it was foretold by those who came before us."

*Geofront, AEL Headquarters
0851 hours*

"So... don't want to sound like nagging, but when are you guys going to let me go home?" – Kaworu
asked as he walked out of the locker room he was directed to twenty minutes ago.

"That's up to doctor Ikari to decide, not me." – the female technician he saw at his impromptu interrogation session yesterday replied. – "Did you put the suit on properly?"

Kaworu looked down at himself and tugged at the skintight white fabric completely covering his body from the neck below. – "I think so."

Now he understood why his medical examination included a measurement of his exact body proportions. He could tell even from just looking at it that the suit was custom-tailored for him – which wasn't a bad thing, considering that he wasn't sure Rei's suit would've fit him. The girl wasn't overly busty but her chest size was still surprisingly generous compared to what her trenchcoat allowed to be seen; Kaworu didn't have a very masculine build yet but his body still wouldn't have fit something designed for hers... to say nothing of him not having the intention to try crossdressing anytime soon.

He also didn't know whether the suit was only to avoid soiling the pilot's clothes with the breathing fluid, or whether it had some other function as well. Considering it had some electronic equipment integrated into it, he guessed the latter. Not that the former would've been unwelcome, considering that he just got his normal clothes back.

"So, what's the next thing you want me to do?"

"Sync test. We uploaded your profile into Unit-01 but we need you to sit in him to make sure we got everything right. Follow me."

The boy was slightly puzzled at her wording. '...him?'

As he hurried to catch up, Kaworu couldn't help but notice how young she was. While he wasn't exactly skilled at telling someone's age, she looked squarely in her early twenties – which gave her away as one of the post-Occupation generation, like him. Due to the presence of the Combine's reproductive suppression field interfering with the formation of certain protein chains essential for early embryonic development, there were no children born during the Occupation itself (except for remote areas too far from the Citadels for complete coverage, mostly some Pacific islands). Nowadays, everyone was either below 24 or over 43, with none between.

After another trip through the maze of corridors that was the facility's interior, the technician dodged into a side room. – "Wait here."

When he heard the door open a while later, Kaworu expected to see the technician come back out and continue leading him to wherever they were going.

Except it was Yui who was standing in the doorway, looking at him with an unreadable expression. Once again, Kaworu felt like he was being examined. It was by one of his fellow humans this time – and yet, it felt just as uncomfortable. There was something in her stare that wasn't there before; what it was, he couldn't tell. But it was definitely there.

"I see your plugsuit measurements are correct." – she finally said, turning away and walking back inside. – "As soon as you board the entry plug, we can get started. Maya, show him to the plug."

"Yes, ma'am." – the technician's voice replied a second before indeed she came back out.

A minute later, the teen found himself in the largest room he had seen in the facility yet, aside from
the hangar where he arrived to yesterday. More specifically, glued to a catwalk overlooking something he didn't even know existed until a day ago.

The helmet was generally of the same size, except it seemed less angular and more streamlined. It also appeared less like a robotic head and more like... well, more like a helmet: instead of the cyclopean mono-eye of Unit-00, this Evangelion had two well-defined eyeholes in roughly the same place a human's eyes would be. Two of its eyes, that is; with the catwalk at neck-height, Kaworu could see see a third eye at roughly forehead-height.

But what grabbed his attention immediately wasn't the eyes.

"...is that hair?"

Hanging from the rear of the Evangelion's helmet and over its back was a large bundle of white, exiting the helmet through the seam around the neck. Coupled with the armor's dull metallic gray color, it slightly reminded Kaworu of an image he once saw in a children's book; an image of a long-haired woman in a helmet. A valkyrie, he thought she was called.

"Don't worry about it; we were going to cut it off after doing these tests."

Kaworu put his hands on the railing and peeked over, spotting the end of the Evangelion's hair at around knee-height. – "I never would've thought these things need haircuts."

"They don't. Normally, an Evangelion is scalped right after construction so that the hair doesn't get in the way, but we haven't gotten around to doing that with Unit-01 before it was frozen." – She looked over its entire length. – "It also seems to have grown further in cryo, so we probably won't put it off for much longer. Like I said, don't worry about it."

"And the color?" – he asked, motioning towards the rest of the body. Also unlike Unit-00, the entire body was dull gray.

"That's the armor plating's normal color. It hasn't been painted yet. Speaking of which, doctor Ikari told me to let you know that you can pick the color, as long as it's not too garish."

"What exactly is garish for her? I mean, you guys already have an orange one."

"That's different. Unit-00 has high-visibility painting on purpose, to make it easier for cameras to track it during mobility tests."

That he didn't expect. – "Oh... okay. Didn't know that." – Inwardly though, the boy wondered. 'Why is she even letting me pick the color in that case? Wouldn't it make more sense to just paint this one like that too?'

"Anyway, you might want to board the entry plug now. Doctor Ikari is not the kind of person who likes it when people are wasting her time."

Kaworu pushed himself away from the railing. – "Thanks for the warning. I'll keep it in mind."

"Also..." – She unexpectedly lowered her voice. – "Listen, I'm sorry if I came across as rude or anything. I've been a little stressed out lately. We all are."

"Lots of work?" – Kaworu guessed with a slight smile.

She sighed. – "Like you wouldn't believe. I'm Maya Ibuki, by the way."
"Good morning, mister Nagisa. How are you feeling?" – came Yui's voice from the speakers.

"No problems... I think. I can't really tell."

He didn't really pay attention last time but now that he was piloting, Kaworu couldn't miss the various holograms surrounding him, all of them blue instead of Unit-00's orange. Aside from the windows projected onto the walls of the entry plug – including one with Yui's image –, there was also a diegetic HUD that kept moving around as he turned his head, always staying in front of but a bit to the side of the direction his head was facing. It didn't obstruct his vision but he only needed to move his eye to look at it.

It was a bit dizzying.

There was also a tiny crosshair-shaped cursor that tracked his eye movement. No matter where he looked, the crosshair followed his glance like a shadow.

"Understandable. This is your first time in Unit-01, after all; we detect no problems on our end but due to certain peculiarities regarding Evangelion technology, there is always a certain degree of uncertainty involved."

"Meaning?"

"The telemetry link we have between the Evangelions and our equipment can only account for so many variables. Still, it does not hurt if you know at least the basics about what you are sitting in. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

"Um... that girl who's been escorting me around? She told me you want me to pick a color for this thing."

"Only within certain limits. This is a war machine, not a fashion statement."

"No, I mean... I don't really have a preference, so... how about we just leave it as it is for now?"

"Indeed?"

"And the hair... can you keep that too?"

Yui's eyes narrowed at that. – "Mister Nagisa, I already said it: an Evangelion is not a fashion statement."

Kaworu threw his hands up defensively. – "I know, I just don't want to give the crew too much work."

"The crew's job is to work on the Evangelion. That is what they get paid for." – She sighed. – "But if you insist, I suppose we could keep the hair. It needs to be cut back, however; it will more likely than not get in the way during both movement and entry plug insertion."

A sudden idea flashed into Kaworu's mind. – "That works both ways, isn't it? I mean, whoever is watching from outside might not be able to see the hatch if it's covered by hair."

"I see your point, but the hair is still in the way."

Kaworu pondered on that for a bit. – "I never had long hair so I wouldn't know, but... long hair is heavier, right?" – he asked after a while.

"That is correct."
"Can you cut it so that it's long enough to extend past the hatch, but short enough so that the hatch can push it aside when opening? Best of both worlds."

"That... is actually a sound proposal." – Yui replied after a short pause, audibly thoughtful. – "It will put additional strain on the motors of the mechanism of the hatch, though."

"Didn't you just say that the maintenance crew's job is to work on this thing?" – he pointed out.

Yui visibly raised an eyebrow at that comeback. – "Touché. Did you read the primer Lilith gave you yesterday?"

Kaworu nodded uncertainly. – "I think so. You want to quiz me about it or something?"

"We're not in school anymore, mister Nagisa. This isn't an exam. You are now aware of what an Evangelion is and how it works, correct?"

He nodded again. – "Yeah. Flesh and blood body with a shitload of cybernetics."

"Language, mister Nagisa."

"Sorry."

"Let us continue with the basics. First and foremost, all Evangelions are equipped with an onboard artificial intelligence for managing subsystem control. You might not always have access to a ground crew and doing everything by yourself would be too straining, not to mention distracting. Multitasking is something an AI does much better than a human, hence why we use one instead of a co-pilot."

"I've never worked with an AI before." – And it was true. The boy never had all that many opportunities to use a computer either; he was familiar with the basics, and that was about it.

"Now you will. He is there to help you; if you have any questions about the Evangelion, feel free to ask him."

There was that pronoun again. – "Him?"

And that's when a new window opened to the side. – "Platform ready to process queries." – The teen was slightly startled at the electronic voice coming at him from every direction at once.

"You already met Lilith; now meet Adam. He will be your partner from now on."

"So... get along and everything?"

"Yes. You can second-guess him, but you would do well to listen to what he says; helping you pilot Unit-01 is the very reason he exists. Never forget that."

"Understood." – He glanced uncertainly at the walls of the entry plug, suddenly very much aware of a third person (?) watching his every move at all times. Especially since said person was an AI and thus, completely unknown territory to him. – "And, um... Adam? Nice to meet you."

"Acknowledged." – The window winked out but Kaworu knew better than to assume he was alone now.

"Next, power systems. Main power is provided by a backpack-mounted dark fusion reactor that can provide continuous output for a maximum length of sixteen hours in combat mode or slightly more
than five days in life support-only mode."

Kaworu let out a quizzical hum at that. – "Dark fusion? Isn't that stuff illegal?"

"It is. However, there is currently no legal alternative that can provide comparable power output at
the same size."

"Why do you need that much energy anyway? Doesn't this thing have muscles?"

"He does. However, an Evangelion's size and mass means its muscles are incapable of harnessing
enough energy from metabolic processes alone to provide any meaningful motive force. Therefore,
the required energy has to be provided by an external source."

"What happens if you pull the plug?"

"There is an integrated backup battery system, composed of the best available graphene-based
macro-scale supercapacitor design. However, it will not last for more than ten minutes."

"And if that fails too?" – he pressed further.

"You mean the effects of a complete loss of power on the Evangelion?" – Yui asked back.

"Yeah."

"Immediate paralysis. There is a tertiary backup battery for the core systems like life support,
communications and AI processing, but everything else will shut down. I believe I do not have to
stress the importance of keeping the reactor undamaged... especially since we didn't fully work out
the integrated shock dampeners yet, so the reactor is somewhat fragile."

That most definitely didn't sound like a comforting thought. – "So if I so much as fall on my ass, this
thing will blow me sky-high?"

Yui gave him a look at that. – "We're not stupid, mister Nagisa. A weapon that can kill its own user
so easily is worthless; the reactor cannot explode on its own unless we make it explode. Turning off
core containment to artificially trigger a dark energy flare functions as the self-destruct system, with
a variable yield depending on the amount of reaction mass remaining. A fully-loaded reactor will
detonate with the force of a nuclear weapon; the estimated blast yield is on the order of twenty
kilotons, maybe more."

"So... that'd be bad. As in, real bad."

"If you're anywhere within one kilometer from ground zero, expect to be tossed around by the
shockwave. That is, unless you're within about two hundred meters, in which case you will be
instantly vaporized, armor or no armor. It's designed to completely destroy an Evangelion that
cannot be recovered by friendly forces and is in danger of capture."

"Which brings me to a warning: the Mode-D switch is located in your seat. Do NOT put
your hands ANYWHERE near it, are we clear?"

"If you don't want me to touch it, why are you even telling me where it is?" – the teen asked with
genuine puzzlement.

"Because I don't want you to go poking around the entry plug, find it and 'accidentally' turn it on
without actually knowing what it does." – she shot back with an edge in her voice. – "Especially not
inside this facility, with hundreds of people inside the blast radius. If I catch you putting your hand
anywhere within the general vicinity of that switch without a VERY good reason, there is going to
be hell to pay. Being fired on the spot will be the least of your concerns."

"...point taken."

She nodded at that, expression softening up a bit. - "Also, based on your previous statement, I presume you understand that utilizing dark energy for power generation is outlawed by governmental decree; accordingly, I expect your discretion regarding what I just told you."

"Considering that I didn't refuse to sit in this thing even after being told what it runs on, I have a feeling I would be locked up too." – he mused, idly shifting his glance around to draw into the air with the eye-tracking crosshair. – "So it's not like I have much of a choice."

That seemed to be a satisfactory answer for the woman. – "Very good. To further reduce power usage, we have plans to outfit the entry plug with cryonic suspension to conserve power on long-duration missions, although it's still in the design stages."

"Why bother with that much? Shouldn't it be easier to only sit in this thing when you need it?"

"Evangelions are, as of now, dependent on a human pilot. Seeing that no known sniper rifle can penetrate the external armor, let alone retain enough energy to enter the entry plug and cause lethal injury to the pilot, it is far safer if the pilot never exits the entry plug at all during a mission. Hence the cryonic subsystem, which would also take care of the issue with supplying rations that aren't spoiled by LCL."

Kaworu had to admit he never even thought of that. – "Okay... sixteen hours seem kind of long."

"In a one-on-one engagement, perhaps. But in a war zone, you might not have access to a support crew, or you might be operating in a hostile environment like the atmosphere of another planet, in which case you need a long-duration power supply to keep life support running. Only sixteen hours puts a serious constraint on operational range, but there is only so much reaction mass the Evangelion is able to carry."

"Have you thought about refueling on the field? Like, I don't know, a giant tank with a hose that hooks into the reactor or something?"

Kaworu could've sworn he'd seen the hint of a smile in the corner of her mouth. She looked almost... proud. – "Already ahead of you there, mister Nagisa. We have a preliminary design for a compact dark matter plasma capsule that can refuel mid-sortie, although it is currently not ready to be tested yet." – And just as suddenly as it came, the smile disappeared. – "Anyway, moving on. Have you memorized the loadout packages from the primer?"

He sighed. – "High Mobility Type, Area Defense Type, Heavy Weapons Type, Sniper Type, Flight Type and Commander Type. B, C, F, G, A and E. Did I get that right?"

"You did."

"You know, it would be easier if you were to just give me a copy and have me read it at home or something," – he pointed out.

Yui shook her head. – "No can do, mister Nagisa. This is classified information, eyes only. It may not leave the facility under any circumstances."

"Fine. Why did you guys skip D, anyway?"

"We didn't skip it. Development on the Hazardous Environment Type was indefinitely postponed, as
"We do not have the means to test it at this time. We also came to realize that it is unneeded, as no currently settled planets require such specialized equipment to operate on the surface."

"Where do you get all this, anyway? Because I don't think you have some kind of hidden manufacturing plant here." – After a brief pause, he uncertainly added – "...or do you?"

"I was expecting you to ask, considering that we indeed lack the industrial capabilities to produce armor and equipment for the Evangelions. That part of the project we subcontracted to Gehirn Heavy Industries, although it is seriously straining our budget."

He decided to risk the question. – "Out of curiosity, how expensive are these things anyway?"

"Including the total costs of research and development, slightly into the eleven-digit range." – Yui replied in a matter-of-fact tone, as if she wasn't talking about several orders of magnitude more money than he saw throughout his fourteen years of life combined. – "I won't lie to you, mister Nagisa: the Evangelion project is draining the overwhelming majority of our company's resources all by itself. If it were to fall through, the AEL is guaranteed to go bankrupt, there is no question about that. This is why I expect you to perform to your utmost at all times. It is not just the company's future that is at stake here, but the employment of hundreds of people."

"No pressure, then..." – the teen muttered under his breath.

Unit-01's helmet is shaped the same as in canon, minus the horn. The third eye is just below the spot where the horn would jut out from. The inspiration for the Eva's hair originally came from the ponytail-like heatsink fiber of the Plan1056 Codarl from Full Metal Panic; since then however, I found out that one of the Evangelion games – NGE2 for PS2 and PSP – already had a visual depiction of Unit-01 with hair coming out of its helmet (to say nothing of the Eva's final appearance in EoE), so I decided to roll with that one instead. No Eva in this story will use its canon visual design; while the designs of the new Evas in Rebuild will be used, they won't be on the same Evas.

Also take note of the different spelling above. Unit-01 without a dash refers to the Eva's canon incarnation, Unit-01 with a dash refers to the one in this story. The two are not the same Eva, so this distinction is deliberate on my part. This notation will also be used for all the other Evas with canon counterparts.
"Oi, mate." – mulled Tōji to his ever-present buddy. – "I wonder if Kaworu's alright. Haven't heard of 'im all weekend."

"Did you go to his place?"

"Nah, I don't even know where he lives. He could've at least given us his phone number or something."

"He doesn't have a phone, did you forget?"

"Oh, right."

The overall atmosphere of the classroom was radically different from the usual bored resignation before class. They both knew what the commotion was about: whatever happened in the city last week, it left multiple blocks completely devastated and quite a lot of others in various states of damaged. Cleanup was still underway in some areas: clearing up debris, filling in craters, even demolishing the occasional building that became structurally unstable. It would take weeks to finish all of it, months to get everything back to the way it was.

And the worst of all, nobody had any idea what did this. They all heard the rumbling and felt the shockwave of explosions while cooped up inside the civil defense shelters, yet none knew what exactly happened. Speculations were abound in both the population and in the media, with both the government and the military refusing to comment at this time. There was considerable media coverage concerning the clearly visible damage to the city and the 10,000-strong division of troops camped out in the hills and nearby military bases, but the actual cause of all this was completely unknown.

Even so, no one seemed to not hear about the quarantined city block where the trail of destruction ended, complete with a large, vision-obscuring tent hastily deployed between several buildings to hide something on the ground.

"Maybe you should ask the class rep." – Kensuke offered, thumbing towards Hikari.

All that remark earned him was a slap on the back of his head. – "黙れ、アホ野郎！ She'd bite my head off."

"Well, you're the one who wanted to know!" – the smaller boy whined, rubbing the now-sore spot. – "Why is it my fault you're chickening out?!"

"Chickening?! I'll show you who's--"

The yelps of Kensuke Aida as he suffered under Tōji's noogie was quickly noticed by the exact person they were just talking about. – “HeyheyHEY! Suzuhara, cut it out!” – was the only warning Tōji received before his ear felt as if a Combine Stalker's faceplate laser was aimed at it. For such a small girl, Hikari had a surprisingly strong grip.

The resulting cry of pain was promptly cut off by a quick slap to the face, courtesy of Hikari's paper
fan. This caused a wave of laughter across the class, which only intensified as the two started arguing.

"-never seem to learn-"

"-butt'in on-"

"-aggressive and irresponsible-"

"-none of yer damn business-"

"Why did you even do that to him?!"

"Like you're one to talk! What did you hit me for just now?!"

"You didn't stop when I told you to!"

"So what?! If I really wanted to hurt him, do you think I'd do it right in front of you?!"

While he meant 'right where you can dish out punishment', Hikari took it as 'right where you have to watch it'; argument or not, she couldn't offer an effective rebuttal through her blush. – "Wh-wh-wh-wh-Wh-Whatever! I don't want to catch you doing this again, understood?!" – Without even bothering to wait for a reply, she turned on her heels and marched back to her own desk...

...or to be more exact, tried to.

She barely covered a few meters before she abruptly stopped dead in her tracks, the two boys looking at her quizzically.

Ever so slowly, Hikari's head turned to the side until she was looking directly in the direction of Rei's desk, the boys' gaze following hers. Rei was sitting at her desk in her usual outfit, with her usual disregard towards the rest of the classroom, legs crossed and left elbow resting on the desk.

She was also holding a thin, sleek knife in her left hand, casually and methodically picking the dirt under the nails of her right hand.

After a few seconds, Rei slowly looked up at Hikari. – "Do you require assistance? If so, please specify the amount of physical harm I am allowed to inflict."

"No, thanks." – Hikari marched right up to Rei's desk and snatched the knife from the other girl, slightly wincing at the blade cutting her finger from just a slight touch. – "And give me that!"

The pale girl paused for a second. Then she reached down to her right boot and pulled out another knife, resuming her previous activity as if nothing happened.

That is, before Hikari took away that one too. – "What are you doing?! You shouldn't bring these to school!"

Rei glanced up at her. Then she slowly reached into her coat and withdrew a palm-sized metal disc. A quick jerk of her wrist and the object unfolded into a six-bladed shuriken-like weapon with a diameter just short of half a meter. Then she resumed picking her nails once more.

"How many of those things you've got?!" – Kensuke demanded incredulously.

"Many." – was all the reply he received.
"Hey, are you listening to me?! I said don't bring weapons to school!"

As Hikari tried to go in for the kill this time however, Rei suddenly held the shuriken away from her. With her other hand, she slightly nudged her shades down to reveal her crimson eyes and stared the other girl directly in the eye. No words, just an unblinking, unflinching stare.

Kensuke was the one who noticed the brunette sweating ever so slightly, hands unconsciously gripping her long skirt, knuckles trembling. Then Hikari suddenly looked to the side, breaking eye contact with what the boy was surprised to note was relief.

"Look..." – she started in a shaky tone. – "just... keep them out of sight, OK? Don't take them out openly, or I'll have to report you."

"I would like to have my property back."

"Sure... sure... just... put them away, alright?"

"Yes." – Rei slowly reached out and pried her knives out of Hikari's shaking hands before pushing her shades back up. As soon as she relinquished the offending objects, the twintailed girl immediately backpedaled directly away from the desk, almost walking directly into another one before she got her bearings and beelined back to her own desk, barely even noticing Mari's puzzled look.

"What was that about?" – Tōji wondered as Rei proceeded to stare out the window next to her desk, ignoring everyone once more.

Kensuke just shrugged. – "Women are illogical. But like I was saying, she'd probably be told if Kaworu was hurt badly enough to miss class."

Tōji scoffed. – "Yeah, I'm not nearly crazy enough to ask her anything after that." – He winced and reached up to his red ear. – "Damn paper fan... if I could, I'd fucking torch that thing with a flamethrower."

"Not sure that would be a good idea, man."

"Why not?"

"Because she might just get offended enough to get a steel-reinforced one instead. Those can injure, you know."

That was when Kaworu all but staggered into the classroom, barely paying attention to the other two's greeting before collapsing onto his desk like a ragdoll with its strings cut.

"What's up with you? You hurt or something?" – he heard Tōji ask.

"No... just too goddamn tired."

After another battery of tests, Yui finally let him go home yesterday night. He expected to go back the same way he came down, via elevator... only to be disappointed when the facility's choice for personnel transit turned out to be a high-speed train running on a track that started at the Geofront's ground level and spiraled around the cavern's circumference several times until reaching the top. It made some sense: elevators only worked if there was power to run them, while the train tracks were accompanied by a two-lane road for cars that could still work even during a blackout. It was also safer, considering that rolling down a slope is much less deadly than a multi-kilometer plunge down an elevator shaft at terminal velocity.
It was dark in the cavern when he left the facility, the lights at the top switched off to conserve power and simulate night for the plant life below. By the time the train made it topside and he breathed outside air for the first time in a day and a half, it was already past midnight.

Which came with the consequence of him not having slept all that much before going to school.

"What do you think happened on Saturday?" – Kensuke asked.

"Don't know, don't care. I just wanna sleep." – While the latter part was indeed true, Kaworu considered himself lucky for having that excuse for deflecting the question. – "You guys are still in one piece, I see."

"Yeah... unlike some others." – Tōji scoffed.

"Like who?"

"Like my sister." – the jock growled edgily.

Kaworu raised his head off the desk at that, tiredness suddenly taking a backseat to his general mood. – "...what happened?"

"Shelter collapsed. She took a giant chunk of concrete to her back; broke every rib and pretty much pulverized her spine. She was pretty much a goner on the spot."

Kaworu didn't consider himself particularly foul-mouthed... which didn't prevent him from letting one loose alongside the sinking feeling in his stomach. – "Shit."

"She was really fucking lucky, though." – Tōji shifted on his chair. – "Hospital's been stockpiling antlion larval extract for critical injuries, ya see. The vorts working there got crackin' with that alien space magic of theirs on her, soon as she came in."

That sounded much better, though. – "So she'll make it?"

"Make it?" – Tōji let out a chuckle. – "Dude, she's gonna leave the hospital this week. They're only keeping her in for observation but otherwise, she's already back on her feet."

"Damn lucky, that girl." – Kensuke remarked.

"Yeah. Never thought I'd say this, but thank god for Second Impact. If the vorts weren't here, she'd have died or gotten crippled for life." – The tracksuited teen's eyes hardened. – "Which is something I honestly wish should happen to the fucker responsible."

"You mean the military guys who fought inside the city?"

"I'm not stupid, man. Have you seen how the city looks like? I don't know what the hell happened, but it sure as hell wasn't an exercise gone bad or something. You just don't blow entire buildings away for the sake of practice. That shit was for real, no doubt about it." – He shook his head. – "Anyway, I know who I blame: the lazy fuck who designed that poor excuse of a shelter. I really hope that shithead gets thrown into prison or something."

"And let's hope the military got whatever they were shooting at." – Kensuke added.

"Yeah, that too."

"How is she?" – Kaworu asked.
Tōji shook his head again. – "What do you think? Only eight years old and almost died already. Of course she's spooked like crazy; gets visited by a psychologist every day."

"I hope she'll be alright."

"Thanks, man."

"Same here." – Kensuke then grinned. – "Though I have to admit, it's partly because watching an elementary schooler being able to whip his ass ragged with a verbal beatdown alone is priceless."

The corner of Kaworu's mouth inched upwards. – "Maybe she took lessons from the class rep?"

"Lessons? Man, if I didn't know better I'd think she's supposed to be called Sakura Horaki!"

Tōji only rolled his eyes in exasperation. – "Not funny, man. One class rep is enough, I really don't need another."

For some reason completely unfathomable to Kaworu, Hikari's most frequent target of 'disciplinary measures' was the jock. In less than a week, he saw her paper fan whack Tōji no less than five times, with Kensuke hinting at more during the four years of elementary school the three spent together (with Kensuke and Hikari having been classmates all along and Tōji transferring in from Osaka during fifth grade). Kaworu himself never really bonded with anyone in his old schools; it's not that he actively didn't want to, he just never felt that attached to anyone.

Sometimes he wondered whether he could've ended up as the fourth member of this little group, had he lived in Japan as a child.

_Geofront, AEL Headquarters
One hour later

In her office, Yui paused her typing in contemplation. After Kaworu's unexpected synchronization with Lilith, she expected him to be able to replicate that feat with Unit-01 as well, but tested him regardless. Her prediction was right: after compiling all available data, the MAGI calculated the boy's sync ratio with the gray Eva at 43.57%. Even though Unit-01 used a blank sync profile to register a new pilot instead of using Rei's existing data like Lilith did, it was still abnormally high for a complete novice.

And she wasn't the only one who noticed.

"Doctor, are you sure these values are correct?" – Maya asked yesterday, after most of the staff left. – "I never thought he'd be that good."

"Rei had similar values with Lilith when she began and look where she is now." – Yui replied as she brought up the results of Rei's latest test. As always, the quiet girl's sync ratio was a rock-stable 79.99999%. That was another anomaly they couldn't understand: for months now, Rei was stuck just a hairline below 80% but unable to surpass it, no matter her plug depth.

With both pilots showing anomalous scores, the technician crew were completely stumped. Unlike Yui.

She alone knew the probable reasons. Of all the several hundred employees at the AEL, only a handful had access to the data vault she opened a few days ago. Out of those, even less knew about
the old files regarding Project Genesis. Not all data regarding the research was stored there, of course: the large majority existed only within the old labs in Sector T, at the very bottom of the facility.

The heart of her sins.

As far as Yui was concerned, those labs should've been destroyed long ago, collapsed to bury their secrets forever. Yet with the newer sectors built above them, it was dangerous to do so without risking the upper facility as well. Still, the entire area was off-limits to everyone but her, Rei and a handful of personnel under close observation for every second spent past the isolation tube. Not just because of the labs, but because of the risk of someone finding Sample A-0 as well.

The boy was still the issue primarily on her mind, however. Anomalous sync scores. Evidence suggesting some kind of telepathic ability. And if his medical report was accurate, accelerated healing as well. He was definitely more than what was immediately apparent, that much was certain.

Yui brought up an old photo digitally stored on her terminal. She took a moment to contemplate the scene: that of three children milling around the legs of two adults, both clad in white labcoats. Disregarding her younger self, she focused on the other adult: a dark-haired man with glasses.

"We were wrong, Gendo." – she spoke out loud, as if the digital replica of her ex-husband could somehow hear her. – "He wasn't a failure."

At the same time, Kaworu rested his forehead against the fence on the edge of the school's roof, shooing away his tiredness to focus on what Tōji said.

He had no way of knowing why exactly did the shelter collapse. Was it from the entity stepping on it? Was it from one of its attacks? Was it from a stray shot by the military?

Was it from something Unit-00 did?

He wondered whether it would've still happened if he would've been inside Unit-00 that day, instead of Rei. Then again, he wouldn't have been able to fight at all, much less fight as well as Rei did. Kaworu had absolutely no idea how in the world did she make something of an Evangelion's size move so nimbly. Her combat style was both acrobatic and brutal, meshing the pragmatism of street fighting with the fluidity of what he guessed was some kind of martial art. She also evidently wasn't a beginner, having struck quickly, precisely and without hesitation. It was clear that she fought before... and from the way she did now, Kaworu had a lingering suspicion that she didn't actually need weapons to kill someone. For all he knew, maybe she already did.

"You are not entirely incorrect."

Kaworu whirled around so quickly he almost lost his balance, startled by Rei's voice. She was less than two meters behind him, sunlight gleaming off her shades.

He had no idea how did she get so close without him hearing, especially with her trenchcoat not being very suitable for quietly moving around.

"What?"

She walked up to the fence, gazing at the cityscape beyond. – "To take a life... to alter another's destiny into one of finality is a terrible power." – she mused. – "A power most are afraid to wield and wish to prevent others from wielding as well. Yet others attempt to make light of it, claiming that death is not final. That one's being persists after the demise of their mortal shell, in denial of the
cessation of existence that is the final destination in the journey called life."

"You don't believe in stuff like God and afterlife, then?" – he asked, standing next to her.

The reply was curt and to the point. – "Afterlife, no. God, yes."

Kaworu remembered the books he saw in her room. – "So you're religious?"

The girl silently nodded before continuing. – "The light of the soul can never be extinguished by darkness. I find solace in the promise of a better world... even if those promises are empty ones."

"I don't believe in God myself."

Rei tilted her head to the side. – "Indeed?"

"I don't like the idea of not being in control of my own fate."

"Understandable. Humans fear what they do not understand; the matters of the divine are said to be beyond comprehension. Unconditional belief has been a part of organized religion for centuries; religious leaders who abused their authority for their own ends could not be questioned without sanctions."

Kaworu nodded vigorously. – "See, that's another thing I don't like about religion. Every time someone bothered to ask 'why', the answer was always 'you wouldn't understand anyway, so stop asking'. I honestly can't get it why anyone could believe in something they don't know."

"They were not given a chance." – she pointed out. – "Submit or be subdued was part of the dogma used by multiple religions, despite their open hostility to and refusal to coexist with each other. To accept the authority of others is the very basis of civilization; it has been since before humanity's emergence, when authority only existed in the form of groups organized around alpha males. It is in our very being."

She turned back towards the city view. – "You need not look back into the past to recognize the truth. The ongoing guerrilla wars in Central Africa and the Middle East prove not all of humanity wishes to partake in the Confederacy's ideal of uniting us under one banner, yet our nation is attempting to enforce its will with an armed response. The Nereid Revolution proved that no one is allowed to leave the Confederacy if they do not agree with its ideals. No matter how much people wish to think otherwise, nothing has changed."

Kaworu couldn't help but agree with that. He himself heard of the incident last year: the Nereid colony repeatedly demanded a decentralization of the Earth-centric government and greater representation for the Confederate populace in shaping national policies, getting rejected each and every time. With public tensions reaching a breaking point, the colony announced their utter dissatisfaction with the Confederate political system and attempted to secede... only for the Confederacy to declare martial law and swarm the system with half of the Navy's carrier groups. The revolution died before it could even began, especially after the 'rogue' political leaders orchestrating the secession disappeared one-by-one in less than a week.

It was around that time the general folk started to realize their nation came quite far from the semi-democratic coalition of anti-Combine resistance cells it began as.

In the propaganda broadcasts that followed the incident, President Keel called the Nereid government 'subversive cowards'. He specifically invoked the infamous Wallace Breen as their comparison, branding them traitors attempting to break the Confederacy's unity from within for a petty attempt at a power grab.
Kaworu still remembered one of his favorite teachers being hauled away in handcuffs after calling bullshit on that within earshot of the class, his peers just standing there and looking after him in resignation, not able to do anything. Nobody heard from him again, with the position quickly being filled with another teacher who carefully avoided criticizing the nation's leadership.

It was all the more reason why the boy didn't want to go into politics.

One of the reasons I chose the Confederacy’s form of government to be authoritarian is that I realized: a world-encompassing nation cannot be anything but heavy-handed. With all the ideological differences and racial hatred between the various demographics, a democratic state simply cannot exist for any meaningful length of time before either disintegrating from infighting or sinking into obscurity from nobody recognizing its authority anymore.

The other reason is that it would be too idealistic, not to mention impossible if SEELE are controlling everything from top-level leadership positions as they do. They still give you general welfare and the illusion of freedom, to give you no reason to revolt - but immediately yank the chain if you do something they don't like, staying in power via a combination of populism and putting clients personally loyal to them into positions of importance. Having been born and grew up in an ex-socialist Eastern European country, I have reliable second-hand sources on the matter.
"Sir, are you sure it was a good decision to settle with a simple investigation?"

"Something had to be done." – Calhoun replied curtly, taking a sip from his glass of water before continuing. – "We need intel on the capabilities of this... 'Evangelion'. The mere fact that they they successfully managed to conceal the development and existence of something like that hints at considerable counter-intelligence efforts."

"Indeed." – followed up a lieutenant general. – "There's no telling what else the AEL might be hiding. In my personal opinion, we should confiscate that thing as soon as possible. Even if the preliminary reports of our analysts are correct, that massive battleframe is practically a walking weapon of mass destruction. We simply cannot allow it to fall into the wrong hands or the consequences could be catastrophic."

"A weapon like that requires an extensive support base no insurgent faction could possibly have." – the rear admiral who asked the first question countered. – "Even if it is used against us, something of that size is a sitting duck for orbital precision fire."

"And risk massive collateral damage and civilian casualties if it happens to sit down in the middle of a populated area? You flyboys must be out of your minds!"

"Patience, people!" – Calhoun called out. It wasn't the first time interservice rivalry between the military's branches almost degenerated a staff meeting into yelling and bickering... and he knew better than to think it would be the last.

Sometimes he cursed having been saddled with this job, even though he knew it was mostly a publicity stunt by Keel. After all, he was a war hero: formerly just a low-ranked security guard in Black Mesa, Barney Calhoun went through one hell of an adventure to get out with his life. Add to that going undercover in Civil Protection while working for the resistance, followed by unofficially becoming a general in the resistance forces by virtue of his reputation as a Black Mesa survivor, ending it all by a flying piece of debris (courtesy of the Prime Citadel's reactor going explosively prompt supercritical) bashing him on the head hard enough to send him into a coma for several weeks, and Calhoun had more than enough adventuring to last a lifetime.

He still wore the jagged scar on his face from that last one – and considering that he was well into his sixties now, it was probably going to stay there for the rest of his life. On the other hand, age meant that he would soon get to retire and finally get away from the constant shouting matches and forced mediation that was his job. At times, he entertained himself with the thought of just gathering all those idiots into a single room, firing an Overwatch pulse rifle's underslung plasma cannon inside and closing the door for a couple of minutes.

That would surely go a long way towards keeping his blood pressure below the doctor's recommendation.

"We all agreed that the AEL's stunt couldn't be ignored. That is why we dispatched the observer in the first place."
"But shouldn't we have sent someone with proper intelligence training?" – the rear admiral pressed.

"Ikari is already suspicious of us; their mainframe is too heavily fortified against cyberwarfare attacks for someone with nothing to hide." – Calhoun pointed out. – "If she were to trace our man to any intelligence training school, all we would do is validate her suspicions."

"Still, are you sure the colonel is the right man for the task?" – a battlegroup captain asked. – "His file has several black marks: minor insubordination, violating protocols, disrespectful behavior, even repeated recommendations for honorable discharge under psychological reasons."

Calhoun shrugged. – "All the better. This assignment not only allows us to keep two issues under watch at the same time, but he can also consider it a paid leave."

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_Geofront, AEL Headquarters_  
_October 3, 2041_

While she outwardly gave no sign of it as she observed the sync test in silence, Yui's mind was in turmoil.

It all started with a simple teleconference, a discussion with Keel about the usual topics: funding, budget allocation, the like. The first deviation was him suddenly asking her to meet him in person. Yui never saw Keel in the flesh before, but when the Confederacy's first citizen asks for your presence, not complying makes quite a bad impression... to say the least.

Had she been living before Second Impact, it would've taken her a plane trip several hours long and at least a few days away from work to travel halfway across the world. Even after the Uprising, wealthier people kept their own private SSTO spaceplanes but Yui wasn't among those; she didn't travel that often to need one, nor did she really see a point. Therefore, her best option was the Planetary Teleportation Grid. Derived directly from the displacers first developed by Black Mesa, then further developed in secrecy by the Resistance during the Occupation, displacement node facilities across the globe provided quick, long-range public transportation at only a fraction of the cost.

Therefore, the day before saw Yui walking out of the Geofront and to the Tokyo-2 Node Facility where she was shunted across a dimensional shortcut around Xen to the Kyoto Regional Hub Facility. From there she took to the Irkutsk Continental Hub Facility and finally to her destination, White Forest City. Travel time: a little under two hours, mostly from waiting for the displacers to be reset. Since reconfiguring the displacement system to a new destination wasn't instantaneous, the facilities all operated under strict timetables with fixed departure intervals.

She fully expected him to ask for technical details about the Evangelions, due to the fact that there was no risk of a communications intercept if they discussed it in person. However, he apparently had different plans. By the time she got her bearings, she was being led into a sealed vault where she got the surprise of her life.

A wall containing a large collection of old photos, each bearing timestamps dating all the way back to the beginning of the 20th century. What was interesting wasn't the photos themselves but what they pictured: cave paintings from what Keel claimed to be an extensive cave system found beneath the Dead Sea.

One picture in particular was scaled up and digitally remastered to reveal a purple, horned figure bizarrely similar to Unit-01.
Others were there as well; the same figure roaring at the sky, a red, hornless one lying on the ground with what looked like nine winged humans circling above... and one that chilled the woman to the core: various animals and shriveled plants lying haphazardly on the shore of a blood-red lake, with massive crosses rising over the horizon despite the radiocarbon dating revealing that the scribbles predated Christianity by several tens of thousands of years at the earliest.

Keel's narration was no less troubling. According to the man, the upper levels of the cave contained paintings of a more recent origin and archaeological excavations have yielded a number of scrolls written in a strange dialect that may have been the original Proto-Semitic language; even with computers, a full translation was still eluding them. What they did find was a disturbingly detailed foretelling of the future; Keel actually recited passages referencing the Toba Catastrophe, various major conflicts in the ancient world, the Black Death in the Middle Ages and World War II.

Then he pointed out a reference to Second Impact.

Yui was seriously considering the possibility of the man pulling a massive practical joke on her expense until he showed her a passage describing the seemingly impossible creature that recently visited Tokyo-2 and the corpse of which the military hastily swarmed afterwards. Most unsettling was the word the texts used to describe it: one that was almost identical to malak, the Hebrew word for 'messenger'. The same word that was later translated into the Mycenaean akero and subsequently corrupted into the Greekaggioles and Latin angelus which in turn eventually became the root for the Western word 'angel'.

Yui knew several fellow scientists who were religious but she wasn't one herself. Yet when she considered the possibility of humanity accidentally slaying an angel, it was a logical conclusion that divine retribution would follow. Keel apparently had a similar train of thought as he expressed his belief that the Evangelions may be the only weapons that can stand up to what was coming.

Using science to battle the divine. Not exactly your everyday scientist's job description.

She didn't find it particularly hard to not go public with what she learned; she had no physical proof and it's not like anyone would believe such outlandish statements right off the bat. She still had a lingering suspicion that Keel wasn't telling the whole story: he carefully maneuvered around certain parts regarding the outcome of the conflict.

Still, his offer to assist the development effort with a cash infusion was welcome, even if he couldn't allocate much without someone taking notice and questioning just where exactly that money is going. Accusations of embezzlement were the last thing the government needed right now. Yui herself had no time for PR either, being busy with figuring out a way to accelerate Adam's development.

The most recent experiment they tried was giving the AI limited access to various online libraries and it seemed to be working so far. Already he demonstrated a tentative grasp of human morality and psychology, with his capability of processing hundreds of books per hour being used to its fullest. Of course, all of his traffic was routed through the MAGI which filtered out undesirable content. Yui's field wasn't AI psychology but she knew that, given enough input from an outside source, AIs eventually develop their own personality if sufficient excess processing power is available.

The AEL knew from their experience that Evangelions were no exception; Lilith was the living (?) proof to that. It was therefore obvious that Adam would eventually follow in his "sister"'s footsteps once he tackled the biggest obstacle in his way: unlike Lilith, Adam was not fully self-aware yet, not having formed a physical self-image. Or to be more exact, Adam viewed Unit-01 as his hardware, the environment he existed in, as opposed to Lilith viewing Unit-00 as herself, an individual separate from the environment.
That was another of the AEL’s secrets: aside from Lilith, there have been no documented cases of spontaneously developed self-awareness at all. Due to Lilith’s nature however, this fact couldn’t be released to the public just yet – even though it would surely earn her developers a Knuth Prize.

Yanking her awareness back to the present, Yui leaned down to a vacant terminal and opened a communication channel to Unit-01’s entry plug. Kaworu immediately noticed being watched. – "What is it? Did I screw up something?"

"Not yet. Does your apartment happen to have two free rooms?"

"Uh, yeah. Why?"

Yui decided now was the time to drop the bombshell. – "I need you to provide permanent housing for two, starting next week."

"Huh?!"

"I'm sorry for the short notice, but this came down directly from the military. They took interest in the Evangelions and are dispatching a supervisor to observe our activities as an alternative to a full seizure of the facility and all research materials. I myself was told only of the fact and that we need to provide accommodation. Considering that you live by yourself, I figured your residence probably has free capacity."

Kaworu closed his eyes, sighing. – "Okay, okay... who's the guy?"

Earth-Moon L1 Lagrange point
October 8, 2041

As the Sun's bright disc rose from behind the Earth's dark mass, the light shone onto the metallic construct floating in the void. A one-time occurrence per lunar cycle, the immense structure of Nexus Station was bathed in the brilliance of the lone star millions of kilometers away, reflecting some of it towards the planet with such intensity that - were it not for the full moon behind it - the station would've been visible from Earth's night side with the naked eye. Its 28-day orbital period gave the station two short sunsets every month, during which the nearby planetary bodies hid the station into shade, its navigation lights the only long-range sign of its existence.

Aside from its radio emissions, of course. And the impossible-to-miss sight of FTL transit.

"All nearby craft, be advised: we have inbound transit. Clear the area immediately."

As the slowly rotating ring system sped up, staggering amounts of energy flowed through conduits built specifically for this purpose and into the dozens of gleaming orange crystals. When the buildup reached a crescendo, a thin beam of emerald energy lanced out from each focal point and into the middle. Nanoseconds after the beams intersected, an explosion of light was followed by the very fabric of space tearing asunder into a green-orange vortex spanning the entire ring.

Teleportation technology was first researched sometime during the late seventies, finally coming to fruition in the form of the A-17 Prototype Labs of the Black Mesa Research Facility in what used to be New Mexico. The science behind the initially room-sized devices was impossibly complex for the common folk, nor was this angle of research public. How could it have been, if first attempts at using it ended up discovering a strange world that was definitely not part of this physical universe?

That part of the story saw the light of the day only when the facility became ground zero for Second Impact.
No one knows why it happened. A piece of exotic matter coming into contact with a high-energy particle beam for a fraction of a second was all it took. It didn't explode in a nuclear reaction or collapsed into a microscopic black hole; rather, xenium sample GC-3883's emission of gravitational waves was so violent, it shook the entire facility's foundations and caused massive landslides on the mesa itself that sealed several evacuation routes, trapping hundreds of scientists inside the complex.

And that's when the Xenians arrived.

Nightmarish creatures defining all evolutionary science, the very aliens the scientists used to research swarmed the facility and surrounding towns by the hundreds, killing all they came across. Even the very soldiers sent to contain the situation. It was now commonly-known history how the US government tried to cover it up, dispatching a USMC force to clean up the infestation and silence any witnesses. Only they didn't expect to be counterattacked by a force far more intelligent than the mere animals arriving before them. The Marines found themselves outnumbered, outmatched and outgunned at every turn, finally withdrawing with a staggering 70% casualty ratio and watching helplessly as black ops units entered the former ICBM launch facility-turned-laboratory and solved what three days and over a thousand men with full armor, artillery and air support couldn't with three hours and a thermonuclear weapon.

Not that it helped much: the detonation's energetic particles found their way to the several tons of xenium stored inside the Lambda Complex, igniting a cataclysmic chain reaction that tore the very fabric of space and time apart. Massive vortexes later dubbed 'portal storms' raged across the entire planet, belching out billions of Xenian creatures attacking everyone indiscriminately. Panicked masses retreated into major population centers as military forces geared up for a long and bloody war.

When the Combine Citadels started raining down on those very population centers from orbit, they got their wish, albeit not in the way they expected.

Seven hours. That's how long it took for the Combine invasion force to turn humanity's collective military hardware into scrap metal. And not just military: entire cities have been exterminated by Combine synths to make an example, to plunge those who were still alive into absolute despair. By the time the smoke cleared, a good third of humanity was in various states of being dead, dying or worse. It was the UN Security Council's last assembly that announced humanity's unconditional surrender, only a week after the accident at Black Mesa. In just that single week, from May 16, 1998 to May 23, the end of the millennium turned from an age of prosperity into an unending nightmare no one could wake up from.

All because humanity got too curious for their own good.

One must consider the other side of the coin, however. While it was teleportation technology that brought Earth to ruin, it was also this very same technology that eventually became humanity's salvation. And the same technology that might prove to be humanity's salvation once more. After nearly fifty years since its inception, advances in the field of teleportation finally unlocked the ultimate prize: a way to cheat special relativity and achieve faster-than-light travel, something that surpassed even the freakishly advanced Combine technology. Even if Earth were to fall once more, humanity would endure, survive and recover. Even if their creators were to go extinct, the massive structures would remain, standing as eternal monuments to humanity's existence.

A single craft crawled out of the swirling event horizon as the focal points continued to pump the exotic radiation scientifically known as displacement energy into the spatial anomaly. As the craft cleared its arrival point, the waygate abruptly cut power to the crystals, resulting in the event horizon collapsing in on itself with a final flash and sending an immense ring of light into space bright
enough to be visible from Earth. The ring's spinning gradually slowed to a halt and cooling nacelles extended outwards from the rim.

"Transit complete, wormhole disengaged. One arrival confirmed. Nexus Control to unknown vessel, transmit identification and state your destination. Failure to comply will result in the seizure and investigation of your craft by Earth Defense Fleet forces."

"Nexus Control, this is the CSS-Odessa. We have a VIP on board, priority transport to Kyoto Spaceport. Transmitting verification codes now."

"...Odessa, Nexus Control. Verification codes confirmed, you are clear to proceed. Do you require escort?"

"Nexus Control, Odessa. Negative on escort. Please notify the defense fleet of our arrival."

"Odessa, Nexus Control. Arrival has been logged. Current local time is 2127 White Forest Mean Time, prepare for chronometer synchronization."

"That's affirmative, Nexus Control. Synchronization in progress."

"Confirmed, Odessa. Welcome home."

Jets of helium plasma erupted from its rear as the small frigate fired its laser-ignited fusion engines and began the long trek towards its destination. From the tiny observation deck on the bottom, a pair of steel-blue eyes glared silently at the planet floating in the distance.

'11 years.' Beneath his graying blond bangs, the uniformed man's eyes narrowed. 'Hard to believe it's been that long... and yet, here I am again.' He sighed. 'I just never learn, do I?'

His musings were interrupted by the automated door behind opening with a hiss and a slim form sailing through the zero-gravity environment. – "So, we're there?" – The teenage girl asked, blond hair trailing behind her.

"Yup."

"Lemme see." – She immediately rooted herself to the nearest window, staring at the distant planet. – "Huh. It does look better than on pictures."

While unusual to someone who spent all their lives on Earth, the statement still carried some truth in it: Earth, Polygonus, Paeon and Sethlans were the only Goldilocks planets throughout the star systems controlled by the Confederacy of Man. Of these three, Earth was the only one with naturally-occurring surface water, let alone indigenous life. Not even Polygonus, the largest and oldest human colony, had surface water until the long-term project aimed at terraforming the planet redirected several icy comets at the planetary equator.

"Is that an admission of defeat I hear there?" – he asked with a small smirk.

The girl's expression blanched at that. – "Oh, for the love of... I didn't actually mean that!"

"Sorry, a bet is a bet. Pay up."

She thumbed towards the planet. – "Down there."

"I'll hold you to that." – He knew from experience better than to try pushing past the point where she agreed on a compromise. Chances are, that was the best he was going to get.
"Yeah, yeah, whatever..." – She settled down next to the window, glancing at the Earth from the corner of her eye. – "So, what's it like down there? Do they really breathe unprocessed atmospheric air? And what about the animals, do they really live outside biodomes?"

The man promptly held up his hands defensively. – "Slow it, kiddo! We have nearly a day 'till the ship lands."

The girl, however, would have none of it, eyes narrowing. – "So what? I already bored my ass off in the week we spent in FTL, what's one more day? Now spill!"

"Not right now, I gotta ask the captain about the exact time we'll land." – he dismissed, kicking away from the wall and twisting his body around with practiced ease to face the doorway. – "Go and get your stuff packed."

Still, the girl didn't let go that easily, following him out to the corridor. – "Didn't you say..." – She paused, making way for a member of the ship's crew heading in the opposite direction. – "Didn't you say that we have nearly a day?"

"I don't know the exact math but it's gotta be somewhere around there. We're talking 323,000 klicks here, give or take a few hundred; not exactly an afternoon stroll in the countryside, you know."

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**The Confederate military's rank structure and their NATO equivalents:**

**Army:** private (OR-1), private first class (OR-2), corporal (OR-3), corporal first class (OR-4), sergeant (OR-5), sergeant second class (OR-6), sergeant first class (OR-7), master sergeant (OR-8), sergeant major (OR-9), lieutenant (OF-1), captain (OF-2), major (OF-3), lieutenant colonel (OF-4), colonel (OF-5), brigadier general (OF-6), major general (OF-7), lieutenant general (OF-8), theater general (OF-9), supreme general (OF-10).

**Navy:** airman (OR-1), airman first class (OR-2), corporal (OR-3), corporal first class (OR-4), sergeant (OR-5), petty officer (OR-6), petty officer first class (OR-7), warrant officer (OR-8), warrant officer first class (OR-9), ensign (OF-1), lieutenant (OF-2), lieutenant captain (OF-3), field captain (OF-4), captain (OF-5), battlegroup captain (OF-6), fleet commander (OF-7), rear admiral (OF-8), fleet admiral (OF-9), supreme admiral (OF-10).

Calhoun's rank of Commander-in-Chief has no NATO equivalent, as that position is usually filled by a head of state. In this case, the rank is given out to a single person at a time, to whom both branches of the military are subordinate to, while he himself is directly subordinate to the head of state. The best real-life equivalent I can find is the US' Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, except that one has no actual command authority and is more of an advisory role.

The exact date of the Black Mesa Incident in Half-Life lore is never mentioned; there are multiple sources but they all contradict each other. After cross-referencing all available side material and staff interviews, as well as the calendars seen in the first game, the HL wiki came up with May 16, 2003 as the official date of the Incident. Another possible year, based on what date falls on which weekday, is 1998. I used the latter. Accordingly, the events of HL2 took place in 2018; the kids were born in late 2027, except Shinji who was born a year earlier and Misato who was born another year earlier than that.
"You sure I'd be fine without a mask? 'Cause if you're messing with me and I suffocate, I'll haunt you 'till the end of the world." – the girl stated with absolute seriousness as the two stood in the ship's cargo bay, now firmly anchored to the ground by gravity. With gravity also came the blessing of her almost hip-length waterfall of blond hair now firmly hanging downwards instead of floating all over the place.

"Do you see anyone wearing a mask here?" – the man shot back, without even a hint of annoyance. It was evident that both were used to such attitude from each other.

As the main loading ramp opened, the cargo bay's stale air mixed with the fresh atmosphere outside. It was a welcome change, as that very same air was recycled and circulated across the ship ever since its departure from Polygonus a week before. While it was still breathable thanks to the constantly working life support system, after a while it gained a faint odor somewhere between sweaty and metallic. Every ship had its own smell, as veteran spacers could attest. Well, as veteran as one from a civilization with barely more than two decades of recovery back from the stone age can get.

"So... what do you think?" – the man asked as they walked down the ramp.

"I don't know." – the girl replied absently. – "It feels... different. Gravity's lighter, too. And it's a bit chilly."

"Yeah, it's supposed to be like that at this time of the year. But you should know that."

"I was... like... three, when we left." – she pointed out.

An awkward, heavy silence settled over them for several minutes before the girl spoke again. – "Why are we just standing around, anyway?"

"I've been told to meet a liaison for the company I'm supposed to be inspecting at the spaceport when we arrive." – he replied.

Before he could continue however, his ears picked up the telltale sound of an electric engine. The source quickly swerved out from behind a hangar, heading directly towards the landed frigate.

The man's mouth drew into a smirk. – "Well, I'll be damned... Haven't seen one of those in ages."

"That's a bike?" – the girl asked with audible interest.

"Yeah and no, you can't have one." – At her blanched expression, he threw his hands up defensively. – "Don't look at me like that! I have no idea how long we'll be here and those things aren't exactly designed to be ridden in full EVA gear."

The nimble vehicle dodged between several larger ones – drawing a multitude of yelled complaints from various people who barely got out of its way – before swerving to a stop right next to the two, the engine cutting out immediately.

The biker, clad in a black trenchcoat and an equally black helmet, fluidly reached into a pocket and
pulled out a small device. The officer was confronted by a holographic image of himself, attached to a personnel file he knew well... for it was his own. – "Are you this person?" – the biker asked with a clearly feminine voice.

"Yes..." – he said slowly. – "Who wants to know?"

Rei finally took off her helmet, much to the other two's surprise. – "I am Rei Ikari, temporary representative of the Artificial Evolution Laboratory. I was instructed to contact you with information regarding your assignment and accommodations during the course of that assignment."

"Why did you dye your hair?" – the blond blurted out abruptly, visibly baffled at Rei's appearance.

"I did not." – Rei replied curtly, without even looking at the other girl.

"Is blue hair some kind of local fad?"

"It is not."

By then, the man finally found his own voice. – "Okay, okay, hang on a minute... Just how old are you, really?"

"I am fourteen years of age."

The two blondes shared a look.

"And you're saying you work for a company." – he continued, voice completely deadpan.

"That is correct. You are to report in the chairman's office at 1200 hours; accommodation will be provided under the following address..."

While the two talked business, the blond girl walked off to the side, watching the yellow-brown contour of the hills north of the city. Looking south, she wouldn't have seen anything other than the city's skyline, crowned with the dark spire of a Combine Citadel. Kyoto was one of the few cities world-wide that still had Citadels, most of them having been toppled during the Great Uprising of 2018. Since Tokyo was left devastated by a combination of widespread urban fighting and the complete destruction of the local Citadel towering over Chiyoda by toppling it over Chūō and part of Kōtō with a nuclear weapon smuggled into the base of the multi-kilometer spire during the Uprising, Kyoto became the Confederate regional sub-capital. Aside from being an administrative center, the city also held Japan's largest spaceport and was the regional hub of the Planetary Teleportation Grid. Anyone who wanted to use the PTG to leave the archipelago had to go through Kyoto first.

Not that she cared, of course. That stuff belonged to history books and like all teens her age, she didn't like school curriculum one bit. What she cared about now is the myriad colors of the autumn forest at dawn, a sight that took her breath away. She had seen enough brown on Polygonus, the color of the dusty terrain tinted by the red dwarf Proteus during half of the 57-hour long day; this, however, was different. It looked... fresh. Natural.

Alive.

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Tokyo-2, Inner District 5
1047 hours

"Did you see the class rep?"
"What about her?"

"She was barely around between classes. Looked really busy."

"I wonder if something's up?"

"Actually, yeah." – Kensuke piped in as the three boys were waiting for the PE teacher with the rest of their class. – "I did some snooping around; heard her talking to Makinami. It looks like we're getting another transfer."

"Again?" – Tōji wondered, turning to Kaworu. – "You've only been here for, what, two weeks?"

"Yeah. You think it's someone from offworld this time?"

Kensuke shrugged. – "Beats me. But the admission request came down directly from the Ministry of Education. That means it must be a big fish."

Tōji rolled his eyes. – "Figures... You see our guy yet?"

"Haven't seen anyone unfamiliar. What if it's a girl?"

"Some ojōsama?" – The jock leaned against the wall with a sigh, his almost-small gym shirt stretching over his toned chest. – "Shit, I really don't need one of those 'be thankful I'm lowering myself to your level, peasant' types. The class rep is enough."

"I think you'd have a much easier time if you were to stop pissing her off all the time." – Kaworu supplied.

Tōji only scoffed at that. – "Asking for the impossible, much? I can't stop existing." – He glanced around. – "Still, if she's hot--"

"Hot?" – Kensuke interrupted incredulously. – "What, the girls we have are not enough? How about Makinami, I heard some guys call her a walking wet dream!"

Tōji shrugged. – "I dunno, she's... weird. You know, reading those creepy yaoi mangas in class and shit?"

Their conversation was broken up by the class filing out onto the court, the trio keenly watching the student body for anyone new. Or at least, Tōji and Kensuke did; Kaworu wasn't all that familiar with everyone yet. But with the beginning of October, it was the last class to be held outdoors – an event of general unhappiness for the male portion of the student body, as the following months would see them cursed with a lack of eye candy in the form of the girls' swimming class. No wonder then that the majority of the boys decided to make good use of this final day, immediately beelining to the fence that separated the two groups and firmly rooting themselves there until the teacher arrived.

Tōji and Kensuke were among them as well, with Kaworu tagging along for a lack of anything better to do.

It was him who first noticed the anomaly on the other side. – "Someone's already in the pool."


"I know I saw something down there." – Kaworu insisted. And indeed, there was a shadow skimming under the surface of the water.

"C'mon, man, the class rep would skin anyone who goes in before she says so."
"Yeah." – Kensuke agreed.

The argument was interrupted by the swimsuit-wearing girls filing into the pool area. The first row halted in their tracks the instant they saw the occupied pool, prompting an immediate pileup. One of the girls called back to the rear, followed by the crowd parting for an evidently annoyed Hikari marching towards the pool.

"See?" – Kensuke continued. – "I told you so."

As soon as Hikari reached the pool's edge, the water above the shadow parted...

...and Aphrodite herself entered the world.

Most, if not all, girls in the school had dark hair, mostly due to Japanese heritage or random chance of having parents with dark hair. Thus, the eruption of strawberry blond among the flying droplets of water was like a nova to all onlookers.

The newcomer promptly tossed her mane behind her, even as she was immediately beset by Hikari. The boys couldn't tell what the two talked about, but it didn't seem to matter: Hikari briefly turned back towards the class and ordered them into the pool.

"Sorry about that." – the blond girl said, resting her back against the pool's edge with a sigh. – "I saw the pool and thought I'd get a quick dip before everyone arrives."

"You like swimming?" – Hikari asked, crouching down next to her.

"Yeah, but I don't get to swim nearly as often as I'd like."

"Why, you come from Africa or what?" – Mari piped in, smoothly dropping herself into the water but trying to splash as little as possible.

Hikari didn't notice when the blond's eyes briefly wandered onto her friend's generous chest, followed by a subtle twitch of an eyebrow. Then the girl shook her head and pointed skyward.

"The colonies?"

"Yeah. Even if you do find a public pool, ticket's usually thrice as expensive as here, or so I'm told. Haven't been to Earth for ages so I don't really know."

"Where have you been?"

The blonde shrugged. – "All over. Dad's in the military, so we move around a lot. Anyway, name's Asuka. Asuka Langley Shephard."

By the time class ended, news of the new girl spread like wildfire across the boys. As soon as the girls started leaving the pool, every single boy glued themselves to the fence when it was her turn.

"Well... we got ourselves a hottie, man." – Tōji murmured, voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah" – Kensuke agreed, only taking his eyes off her to glance in Kaworu's direction. The other boy was resting his back against the fence, facing almost directly away from the pool. – "You're not interested?"

"Not really." – Kaworu replied, stretching himself. He only hung out around the fence because his
friends were there too; he couldn't care less that the girls were in swimsuits... even though the two genders switched PE locations every day and last time he was at the pool, a full half of the girls in the class were ogling him in particular. With his pale skin, he stuck out like a sore thumb.

"Your loss. I don't think you'd be her type anyway."

"Why?"

"'Cause your name stinks!" – Tōji broke out into roaring laughter, Kensuke immediately facepalming with a groan.

Kaworu just looked between the two of them, completely and utterly confused. '...I don't get it.'

"...you just had to use that stupid line, didn't you?" – Kensuke asked in an exasperated tone. – "Never mind he doesn't even know what kanji are, much less what they mean. You really need to keep working on your delivery."

"Sorry... sorry..." – Tōji gasped out between bouts of laughter. – "Couldn't miss that chance...!"

Kensuke rolled his eyes at that. – "Anyway... wonder how long it'll take until half the school will be running after her."

They didn't have to wait long for the answer to that particular question: as soon as she stood up, a large majority of the boys started hollering and whistling.

She briefly paused at that. The boys couldn't see her roll her eyes, or the frown of annoyance. But they did see her quick and to-the-point response in the form of a raised middle finger.

Just like Tōji a short while before, Mari was laughing so hard that Hikari unconsciously positioned herself closer to her friend, in case the latter encountered problems with breathing.

Geofront, AEL Headquarters

"Ma'am, the observer has arrived."

Yui nodded. – "Thank you, Maya. Send him in."

Her first impression when the door opened was that of someone who wasn't much for formalities or professionalism. Despite the uniform, the man's posture was that of calmness, his steps a casual stroll rather than a militaristic march. Yui had learned long ago to watch out for small things like these; establishing a rough profile on someone's personality allowed her to choose her wording and steer the conversation in the way she wanted, controlling the playing field without resorting to blatant manipulation. It was far more efficient than direct manipulation, as people tended to let their guard down when they saw no need for keeping it up – something she could use to her advantage.

What she guessed from this officer was that he was the laid-back type who didn't really give a damn about what he was sent here for. Quite far from what she was expecting, but it was a welcome surprise. Not having to constantly look over her shoulder to make sure he doesn't find out anything he's not supposed to would go a long way towards keeping her blood pressure under control – which, in turn, would go a long way towards making it easier for her to talk with the man without snapping at and alienating him.

His heavily graying blond hair and blue eyes were telltale of someone of northwestern descent.
When Yui looked into those eyes however, they told her an entirely different story than the one she surmised from his attitude: that of a man who had seen hell itself and crawled out of there to live another day.

In that regard, she was reminded of a picture she once saw of Gordon Freeman.

"Welcome to the AEL. I'm Dr. Yui Ikari, chairwoman of this company." – she introduced herself as she rose to meet him, rounding her desk.

The officer nodded at that. – "Lieutenant colonel Adrian Shephard, Confederate Armed Forces." – They shook hands.

"American?" – Yui guessed.

"Used to be. Quite the setup you guys got here." – he quipped before Yui returned to her desk, with him taking the lone seat in front of the desk. Yui had it brought into the office on purpose, as making him stand wouldn't make a good impression.

"To be honest, I expected the military to send an intelligence officer or something like that." – Yui said in a tone that made it clear she meant no offense.

Shephard promptly held up his hands mock-defensively. – "Don't ask me, doc. I'm just as much in the dark about what the brass thinks as you are. They told me to get over here, so I did. That's all there is to it, really."

"I see. I trust your trip here was pleasant?"

"Pleasant?" – He scoffed. – "That's definitely not the word I would use... Have you ever traveled anywhere by Waygate?"

"I haven't had the need or opportunity yet."

"Let's just say that if you thought a train trip across the planet was boring, use a Waygate. You'll be amazed." – he deadpanned.

"I'll keep that advice in mind."

Shephard sighed. – "Alright doc, let's talk business. Scuttlebutt says you guys stirred up quite the hornet's nest in the higher echelons, but brass wouldn't tell me anything about it. Said I'd get my briefing over here."

"Well, then..." – Yui shifted in her seat. – "About half a month ago, an alien entity of unknown origin appeared in China. A combined navy and army force engaged it but failed to destroy or even damage it before it reached the city. At that point, our company opted to release a research project we have been developing for the past few years. It succeeded in killing the entity in short order. However, the fact that development had taken place without involvement or even knowledge of the military did not settle well with your superiors."

"No shit, Sherlock." – he muttered under his breath.

"Language, please."

"Sorry. How big was that thing, anyway? The alien, I mean."

"The military confiscated the carcass, so we could not obtain an exact measurement. However, its
height was in the range of sixty meters."

The man's eyebrows promptly shot up as high as they anatomically could. – "Sixty meters? What the hell was it, Godzilla?"

"I don't know. Would you like to see a collated summary of our observations?"

Shephard waved her off. – "Eh, don't bother. I'm not a scientist; chances are, I wouldn't understand a word of it."

"As you wish." – Yui said, inwardly surprised at his open admission. – "However, the offer is still open if you change your mind later."

"Frankly, I'm not even sure this wouldn't count as classified information for the brass."

"It's based entirely on our independent observations; sharing it with you is my own prerogative." – Yui remarked. – "After all, how do your superiors expect you to carry out your job here if you are not allowed to find out anything?"

Shephard chuckled. – "Touché, doc."

"Of course, we cannot give you unlimited access to our research materials. We still have industrial secrets to consider, after all."

"Okay. I'll try not to get in your way. Any more than necessary, I mean."

"That is enough for me, colonel." – For now, at least.

He shifted in his seat, folding his arms. – "So... what exactly is this research project that got everyone riled up? Because if it managed to take down that monster thing you mentioned, I'm guessing it's not a biological weapon."

"Not the kind you are thinking of. Project E replicates Combine synth technology with terrestrial materials and science, utilizing a purpose-created lifeform as the organic framework."

Shephard just gave her a blank stare.

"It's a bipedal weapons platform similar in principles to a battleframe, but has a flesh-and-blood body underneath the armor."

That seemed to get things across. – "Ah. So, it's... like... a gigantic, high-tech attack dog, or something?"

The corner of Yui's mouth drew into a smirk at that comment. – "Nothing of the sort. You will receive detailed technical data later. For now, I need to report your arrival back to your superiors; do you have any complaints so far?"

Shephard shrugged. – "None that I know of. Logistics is moving us in right now, though I noticed the apartment isn't empty. I'm sure you know something about that but still asking, just in case."

Yui nodded. – "Ah, yes; I believe you've already met my daughter Rei?"

"Yup."

"She's one of our two test pilots-"
He nearly jumped out of his seat at that. – "Whoawhoawhoa, test pilot? Did I hear that right?"

Yui's eyes narrowed ever so slightly in annoyance for being interrupted. – "Yes, you did. The owner of the apartment is our other pilot, Kaworu Nagisa. He should be in school right now, but he knows about your arrival."

"...school?"

The uncertain tone of his response immediately got Yui's attention. – "He's the same age as Rei. Why?"

The man visibly gulped. – "Um... that... could be a problem."

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1647 hours

For the third time that day, Asuka let out an annoyed sigh. That gray-haired creep had been following her ever since she left school. She suspected he was a stalker... as it certainly wouldn't be the first time that happened. On every single planet she visited in her soon-to-be-fourteen years of life, she always had a gang of boys drooling after her. She never seriously dated any of them as they were always more interested in the packaging than the contents, not to mention the potential interference a serious relationship could mean towards her intended career path.

And at any time a Romeo-wannabe got a bit more forceful, he quickly found himself on the ground with a bleeding nose and severe abdominal pains.

Even in this age, very few teenage girls had military-grade close-quarters combat training in unarmed hand-to-hand, knife and bayonet - and of those, even fewer were fully certified to pilot a battleframe. And with extraordinary skill, too: she often heard that her prowess in the cockpit was on par with a professional pilot. Most of it was thanks to her connection to the military via her father; he was the one who taught her fighting and pulled strings concerning the rest of her training. He alone knew what she truly wanted to do with herself and didn't object; after all, they shared their grief.

Naturally, there are some things even family don't share with each other. For Asuka, it was her sexual orientation; for her father... Asuka suspected he did military service before Second Impact but the man never talked about it, so she didn't press. Eye for an eye. Live and let live.

As she rounded a corner and saw the gateway of the house she was passing next to, the girl had an idea. Instead of continuing her journey, she stealthily slipped into the nook and pressed herself against the wall for as much concealment as possible. Sure enough, her stalker rounded the corner and walked past her without stopping.

"Hey, you!" – Asuka called out as she emerged from hiding, noticing with hidden satisfaction that her unexpected reappearance made the boy jump. – "Why are you following me?"

"Why would I follow you?"

'Nice try.'"Oh, and you just happen to live in this direction, right?"

"Yup. But I'm not going home yet." – And just like that, he continued to walk away.

'Gotcha.'"Then you were following me."

Kaworu rolled his eyes in exasperation, pausing in his step again. – "No, I was going there." – he said, pointing at the hobby electronics shop on the other side of the street. It was the same
establishment he tried to visit on the day Sachiel showed up – and the same one he visited a few times since, now that he had something resembling a stable income.

Asuka didn't believe him one bit, but decided to leave it at that. – "Yeah, yeah, whatever."’*He obviously made that up just now to avoid getting busted. Does he think I'm stupid?"* she grumbled inwardly.

As he rode the elevator to his apartment, Kaworu was thinking along less offensive lines. He recognized her from school but didn't expect for a moment that she would actually stop and accuse him like that. It would indeed seem that they lived in the same direction, as luck would have it. The teen just couldn't decide yet whether that luck was good or bad. Only time would tell.

He, of course, didn't forget that today was also the day he was supposed to receive permanent company at home. Thus, he wasn't surprised at the additional name tag reading A. SHEPHARD on his door, nor at the number of boxes piled up along the wall next to the door itself.

"I guess you're the guy who owns this place." – quipped Shephard as he emerged from the kitchen. – "Am I right?"

"If you're the guy sent by the military, sure." – the boy said as he finished forcing his shoes off of his feet. Scruffy as they were, at least these ones didn't have a hole on their soles yet. Even so, he suspected that he'd need to look into getting new ones sometime in the future. – "Name's Nagisa, Kaworu Nagisa."

"I know; the door's tag was a giveaway and doc Ikari mentioned you too."

"I hope she knows she owes me one for this."

Shephard snickered. – "Got voluntold, eh? Anyway, my name's Shephard and to tell the truth, I freaked out a bit when the doc told me how old you were."

"Why?" – Kaworu asked in complete puzzlement.

"My daughter's a bit... twitchy if a guy gets closer to her than she likes." – He turned towards the bathroom. – "Asuka, could you stick your head out for a minute?"

The bathroom door opened...

...and out came a very familiar blond teenager, currently drying her hair with a towel.

As soon as her eyes fell on Kaworu, Asuka groaned. – "Ah, for the love of... what the hell are you doing here?"

"I take it you two already met?" – Shephard quipped dryly.

"This creep has been stalking me since school, can I kick his ass?" – she asked in a completely casual tone.

"Considering that he's our new landlord, I don't think so." – the man replied in an equally casual tone.

She let out another groan at that. – "You've got to be kidding me..."
"Afraid not, kiddo." – He then turned back to Kaworu, who spent the entire exchange looking back and forth between the two. – "Anyway, I was surprised someone of your age would be living here all alone."

Recovering from his puzzlement, Kaworu shook his head. – "I moved in here myself less than a month ago."

"Studying abroad?"

The teen made an embarrassed chuckle. – "Not quite, but... you could say that I'm here for school reasons. I used to live in Europe."

He didn't notice both of his new housemates ever so slightly flinching at that.

Asuka was the one who recovered first. – "Well, if you two are quite done with the pleasantries, I'm outta here."

"Asuka, don't be an ass." – her father warned.

"I'm not an ass." – She looked at Kaworu, eyes narrowing. – "Just because we live in the same place doesn't mean we're friends or anything. Better remember that."

"Yeah, yeah..." – Kaworu sighed before heading for his room, walking past her.

"Don't 'yeah, yeah' me! I'm talking to you, asshole!" – Asuka snapped after him, causing him to stop in his tracks. – "Just so we're absolutely clear: my stuff is off-limits, my room is off-limits, I am off-limits. Trespass on any of these and I will chuck you headfirst through the nearest window, your house or not. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Good."

Behind them, Shephard buried his face in his hand with a sigh.

Chapter rewrite complete on 15/06/27

Believe it or not, Kaworu's personality in the initial version of this story was originally inspired by Kamina. Over the years, however, I realized that Kamina's usual memetic portrayal completely misses the forest for the tree: it is downright stated that his bravado and MAN AMONG MEN attitude is a fake one he puts on to provide emotional support to those around him. To quote Wikipedia, "Diffusion of responsibility is a sociopsychological phenomenon whereby a person is less likely to take responsibility for action or inaction when others are present. Considered a form of attribution, the individual assumes that others either are responsible for taking action or have already done so. The phenomenon tends to occur in groups of people above a certain critical size and when responsibility is not explicitly assigned." The way I see it, Kamina is consciously aware of this but also recognizes that he's not the most qualified person to take action, hence he takes that responsibility onto himself in order to motivate others into acting. On some level, Kaworu's current incarnation is fundamentally the inverse of Kamina: he actually IS qualified to act, but either fails to recognize or refuses to acknowledge that fact. As this story is still a very long way from over, I'll leave the eventual verdict up to the reader's interpretation.

The pun Tōji tried to make on Kaworu's name is something that will most likely fly over the
reader's head without an explanation. As you probably know, Kaworu's given name is canonically written in katakana (カヲル); the middle character of his name, オ (wo), is an archaic one that has been supplanted by オ (o), pronounced the same way. One possible way to write Kaoru with kanji is 薫, meaning 'incense, smell, fragrance, aroma'; its feminine version, Kaori, is written with the 香 kanji for the same meaning. Despite having a feminine version however, Kaoru is actually a gender-neutral name commonly given to both genders in Japan.
Kaworu hummed in annoyance as he realized he soldered the damn capacitor to the wrong place. This wasn't the first mistake he made today, courtesy of his concentration currently being disrupted by the loud electronic music coming from next door. Repairing damaged circuit boards without being able to pay attention was not an easy task, but it was one he had to do regularly in order to avoid sleeping in.

Or maybe he should stop silencing his makeshift alarm clock every morning by tossing it at the nearest wall, he idly wondered. That could work too.

For now, he carefully applied the soldering iron until the tin melted and he could force the component off the board without damage, casually blowing away the wispy fumes rising from the tin. He didn't like using unleaded tin because of the higher melting point, not to mention the fumes and being easily smeared. Most of the time however, he didn't have a choice in the matter: buying the tin cost him money, money he didn't really have the opportunity to spare until recently.

This particular batch of tin was the last one he brought with him from his previous home, melted off of an irreparably broken twenty-plus years old panel – like almost all of the tin supplies he ever used. He learned the tricks of the trade during his childhood in Austria, raiding a nearby scrapyard for parts and materials, then jury-rigging it all together. Most of his experience was based on simple trial-and-error, aside from the occasional moldy remains of a book containing some wisdom on the matter. Naturally, it didn't go completely smoothly all the time: ICs burning out from overvoltage, capacitors exploding from reversed polarity... he accumulated quite a long list of failures before he actually started building anything meaningful.

Back in the present, Kaworu distantly heard the door to the next room open and Shephard saying something unintelligible to Asuka. Her response was equally unintelligible but a few seconds later, the music turned off.

"Finally..." – Kaworu grumbled. He didn't exactly have a musical preference – courtesy of his former poverty – but it most definitely didn't include the kind of music Asuka was listening to. Nor Rei's, for that matter, but at least heavy metal wasn't so monotonous.

His door opening shook him out of his musing. – "Hey, idiot!"

"What is it?" – He looked up... and straight into the face of Asuka with a pair of small, rectangular glasses resting snugly on her nose.

"Dinner's ready, so get you ass out here."

Kaworu casually placed the soldering iron back to its socket and flicked off the transformer's power switch. – "Right. And what's with those glasses?"

Asuka visibly jolted in realization of someone unworthy seeing her no doubt embarrassing visage. – "None of your damn business. And if you tell anyone, I'll kill you!" – she growled before slamming the door.

Kaworu shook his head in annoyance. 'Here for barely a day and already strolling around like she owns the place... this will be fun.'
2143 hours

Asuka casually turned a page in the book she was reading. Dinner went pretty much as expected: her and that gray-haired creep exchanged verbal jabs nigh-constantly, but her father always stepped in before the situation escalated. Although she would never admit it, Asuka secretly enjoyed the sparring. A huge majority of boys she met during her almost-fourteen years of life practically salivated over the sheer amount of raw, natural beauty Asuka had the fortune of being born with; this, however, also meant they backed down far too quickly for her liking, in a futile effort to get on her good side. Little did they know that anyone who looked at her as if she was a piece of meat was automatically disqualified of her attention. Asuka was a woman and proud of it; she refused to be anyone's trophy.

Not that it really prevented her from flaunting herself at 'unworthy' males. Tempting – then saying "nuh-uh" with a seductive half-smile – was a great source of amusement for her. She frequently provoked jealousy from her fellow girls but that only served to fuel her fire more... especially once she realized her body didn't really care which gender she fantasized about during her private happy hours.

There were times – rare, but still there – when Asuka was jealous of someone else. Despite her otherwise borderline-goddess appearance, nature granted her a strictly average-sized chest. One of her new friends, Mari, was one such sore spot: Asuka was miffed quite a bit at the other girl's generous endowment. On the other hand, she did know about the occasional back pains large-chested women suffered from, lessening the jealousy somewhat.

As far as Asuka was concerned, the least her more endowed peers could do to compensate her was to serve as the objects of her fantasies.

She was fully aware, of course, that objectifying her fellow girls while refusing to be objectified herself was hypocritical. However, she had no illusions that her own wishes would in any way deter boys from imagining her face-down-ass-up in bed as they take her naked and sweaty body from behind. After all, even Asuka imagined herself like that once, only to come to the conclusion that having sexual fantasies about oneself borders uncomfortably close to narcissism – to say nothing of one knowing one's own body the best and thus quickly getting bored of it.

Still, Asuka didn't consider herself a slut. To be one would require her to be sexually promiscuous, but she could hardly be called that if she kept all her fantasies to herself. In her previous classes, she knew at least one girl who did the deed and went all the way (not that it did her boyfriend any good) but Asuka wouldn't follow that example. Not that she didn't want to try the real thing, but she would never jump into bed with a random guy who's more likely to brag about bagging her than actually appreciating her choosing him for her first time.

When fantasizing about her fellow girls however, Asuka had a simple rationalization: if being gay (and by extension, bisexual) wasn't considered 'normal' by the mainstream, it didn't count.

For that very purpose, she made sure to subtly evaluate the assets of every girl in her new class after PE. As expected, Mari was the unrivaled queen in that regard – although Asuka had a lingering suspicion the other girl caught onto her.
"It's been ten days since the incident in Tokyo-2 that left several buildings damaged. Government officials still refuse to comment, citing that investigation into the incident is still underway and a reassurance that the military has the situation under control."

"This is fishy, man." – Kensuke commented to Tōji, referring to the news broadcast he was watching on his tablet. – "Sounds like a cover-up to me."

Tōji threw up his hands in defense. – "Don't ya come at me with that conspiracy theorist bullshit. Whatever you're up to, I don't wanna know."

"Hey, guys." – grumbled Kaworu as he dropped into his seat.

Kensuke was the first to notice Kaworu's distinct lack of enthusiasm. – "What got you in such a bad mood?"

Kaworu made an irritated sigh, resting his forehead on the desk. – "Guess who happened to move in at my place with her father, then decided to act like she owns the place..."

"I'm guessing a girl, based on you just having said 'she'."

"Bingo."

"And? Who is she?"

Without lifting his head up, Kaworu pointed at Asuka. – "Here's a hint: she's blond."

Everyone in earshot went dead silent at that.

Then everyone in earshot snapped their heads towards Asuka.

Then back at him.

A collective – "EEEEEEHHH?!" – erupted from every single boy in earshot of Kaworu. And it wasn't just the noise: all of them collectively jumped out of their chairs and flocked around Kaworu's desk, trying to out-yell each other with incredulous questions.

"You really live with her?!"

"Lucky bastard!"

"Why you?!"

Kaworu covered his head. – "Guys, GUYS!" – he called out at the top of his lungs, getting the others to quiet down for a moment. – "Leave me alone! I didn't ask for it, nor do I want it!"

"Why the hell not?!" – one of the boys fired back, restarting the sonic storm of outrage.

What nobody in the class believed could ever happen happened: the group around Kaworu was so fired up that even Hikari failed to make them pipe down. Mari watched her friend get increasingly agitated in trying to get people's attention, face getting progressively redder at being ignored...

...until she reached into her sleeve and unsheathed her paper fan.

Then she reached into her other sleeve and pulled out a second paper fan.

Mari immediately winced. – "Oh, this is not going to be pretty."
A second later, the group of boys suddenly found their ranks being violently disrupted by a pigtailed dervish, arms moving so fast they could barely be seen as they relentlessly whacked everybody in arm's reach. She alternated her targets between every hit, but her sheer speed was such that the number of her victims just didn't matter. And she didn't attack just those on the group's outskirts.

No, she charged into the group like a human battering ram, those already under attack from her scattering to the wind like a disturbed flock of crows.

Kaworu's only warning was Tōji's sudden scream of – "FUCK ME!" –, followed by the jock diving over the desk behind him in panic.

Then Hikari raised both paper fans above her head and brought them down in an overhead strike. Straight onto Kaworu's head.

The sharp sound of the impact echoed across the classroom like a whip, making everyone wince.

Slowly, Kaworu raised his head and looked up at Hikari. – "...what did I do to deserve that?" – he asked calmly.

At the edge of his perception, he heard someone mutter – "What the fuck? Is this guy invulnerable?"

"I heard that!" – Hikari shot back at the whisperer. – "What kind of language is that?" – She then looked at the desk Tōji was hiding under. – "And I heard you too, Suzuhara! How many times do I have to tell you to not swear in class?!"

A scared whimper was the only sound that came out from underneath the desk.

"And you, Nagisa! What exactly were you trying to achieve, bragging like that?!

"I wasn't bragging!" – Kaworu defended himself. – "Do I look like I want to live with her?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Every eye turned towards Asuka as she stood behind the scattered remnants left by Hikari's charge, hands on her hips. Kaworu idly noticed that she wasn't wearing glasses this time; he guessed she probably used contacts in public.

"What's your problem with me, creep?" – she asked again.

"Aside from you talking down to me every single time you open your mouth? Nothing." – Kaworu muttered.

"Good. I don't want you to think you're automatically entitled to anything, just because you happen to live with me."

"You already said that yesterday."

"And I'm saying it again, just in case you already feel like doing something that might result in my foot getting closely acquainted with your teeth." – Asuka then looked at the crowd and smirked. – 

"So don't you listen to this idiot, boys... but then again, don't get your hopes up either." – she added with a seductive wink before retreating to her desk behind Hikari's, ignoring the storm of squeeing that erupted behind her.

Mari didn't let the matter lie, however. – "So it's true? You two really live in the same apartment?"

"Unfortunately, yes." – Asuka grumbled as she sat down.
"He hadn't... tried anything, did he?" – asked Hikari.

"Of course not." – Asuka leisurely flipped her hair. – "Not yet, anyway. But if he does, I'll show him what 'world of hurt' really means."

Back at Kaworu's desk, the gang finally dissolved and Kaworu glanced back at Tōji, who was currently climbing out from under his impromptu shelter, cautiously making sure that Hikari wasn't nearby. – "See what I mean? You all gush over her looks, but Scheiße is she arrogant..."

Tōji shook his head, occupying his chair again. – "Man, I still can't believe you... What IS it with you and chicks?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't you dare pretend you didn't notice!"

"Notice what?"

"Anyway..." – Kensuke interrupted. – "Who's the other guy who moved in with you?"

Kaworu thumbed towards Asuka. – "Her dad. Military. Good guy."

"Military, you say?"

"Here we go..." – Tōji sighed.

"Hey, I just wanna see what his public profile says! No harm in that. So, he's got the same last name as her, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay..." – Kensuke started tapping on his tablet. – "Got 'im." – he announced a minute later. – "Lieutenant colonel Adrian Shephard. Army. Enlisted in 2024, currently on Earth for an assignment. Married in 2027, Kyoko Soryu, one child. And... ouch."

"What?"

"Wife died in 2030. I'll see if I can find out more." – Kensuke resumed fiddling with his tablet.

Tōji glanced at Asuka. – "Man... that sucks. She was like, what, three at the time?" – he murmured.

"Seems like it."

"Yikes. Yikes." – Kensuke said suddenly, visibly and audibly wincing.

"What?" – the other two asked in a chorus.

"Have you guys heard about that terrorist attack in Hamburg, back in 2030?"

"I haven't." – Kaworu spoke up.

"Some masked goons raised hell at a scientific convention, took over a hundred hostages. Police failed to smoke them out, so they called in the military counter-terrorist unit." – The otaku shook his head. – "It went as bad as it could possibly go: when the bad guys felt the noose tightening around their neck, they gunned down three dozen hostages, blew up half of the building and slipped away in the chaos. Not a single one of them was caught; hell, no one knows who they even were. I heard
Keel read the CTs one hell of a riot act afterwards."

"That sucks, but... where does that come in?" – Tōji asked.

Kensuke glanced towards Asuka before lowering his voice. – "I found her mom's name among the casualties."

1036 hours

'I found her mom's name among the casualties.'

Those words kept repeating inside Kaworu's head. Throughout class, between classes, even while he was washing his hands in the restroom. It was like that tune he once heard as a child somewhere, refusing to leave the forefront of his mind for even a minute.

He was seeing the girl in a different light now. She was still irritatingly arrogant, yes, but there was also something else. It wasn't sympathy, it wasn't pity, it wasn't schadenfreude... he had no idea what the emotion was, but it was there. And most irritatingly, he had no idea what prompted it either. It didn't matter what part of the world one was in, it was almost impossible to find anyone who hasn't lost friends or relatives during Second Impact. The only thing that really differed in her case was that she suffered her loss after Second Impact – which, while rarer, still wasn't unheard of, thanks to the copious numbers of Xen wildlife roaming the countryside all over the planet. That was why the Confederate military maintained such a large ground-based force even in peacetime, after all.

But he did know better than to blame her attitude on her background. After all, if growing up with only one parent could make one like that, then he, having grown up without both parents, would be an utter psycho. Yet he wasn't (as far as he could tell, anyway), so that theory was bogus right from the start.

His thoughts were finally and mercifully derailed when he walked out of the restroom and immediately heard someone trying to get his attention. – "Um... hey."

It was the boy he defended on his first day in school.

"What? Me?"

"Y-yeah. You're Nagisa, right?" – the geek asked, eyes looking everywhere but him.

"Yeah." – Kaworu tilted his head to the side. – "Why are you nervous? I don't bite or anything."

"I know, it's just... some guys wanted to talk to you."

"Did the guys I saved you from put you up to this?" – Kaworu asked immediately.

The geek shook his head vigorously. – "No! I've been asked to give this message to you."

"Alright then... who are they?"

"I don't know them either; some are upperclassmen, I think. They're waiting behind the school right now... but if you don't have time, I can tell them that."

Kaworu shook his head. – "No, I'm coming. Lead the way."

Only when they were outside did Kaworu ask the question that was nagging him for a minute now.
"Say... did those guys bother you ever since? The ones I beat up, I mean."

"No, haven't seen them." – The geek paused in his step to turn towards Kaworu, eyes still downcast. – "Listen... I know this is probably going to sound ridiculous, but... if I can help you with anything, anything at all, I'd be happy to."

"I didn't save you because I wanted anything from you." – Kaworu protested.

"Even so, I still want to help." – the boy insisted.

As they rounded the corner of the school building, Kaworu spotted them. Eight boys in a group, quietly talking about something his ears couldn't catch. He almost immediately concluded that it wasn't a boss-and-underlings type setup. The atmosphere was just too different. He didn't quite know how, but Kaworu had a knack for noticing details like that about people, somewhere on an intuitive level.

What that intuition told him right now what that the gathering was a round-table arrangement of equals.

As he approached and the teens looked up at him, one of them, wearing a dark brown hoodie, pushed himself away from the wall he was leaning against. – "You Nagisa?"

"Yeah."

Despite his face partly being hidden by his hood, Kaworu could plainly tell that the other teen looked him over. – "We've been hearing some interesting stuff about you."

"Let me guess... that I chased those three idiots away from him?" – Kaworu asked, thumbing at the geek behind him.

"And that you beat them up afterwards."

Kaworu cringed. – "That too?"

"The whole school knows." – one of the other boys added.

"For the record, they attacked me." – Kaworu said defensively. – "If you don't believe me, ask Suzuhara in my class. He saw the whole thing."

"Oh, we believe you alright." – Hoodie assured.

"So... what's this all about?"

Hoodie rested his back against the wall once more, folding his arms over his chest. – "Why exactly did you jump to help him?"

"Why, you have a problem with that?" – Kaworu challenged.

Apparently, there was no need to. – "Hell no! We're here because we agree with you." – The others all nodded. – "So, why?"

"Because he needed help."

"You don't like guys who pick on others?" – someone asked from the back.

"Did you guys know I came here from Vienna?" – Kaworu asked back.
"Now we do." – Hoodie replied curtly.

Kaworu sighed, resting his back against the wall himself. – "Back there, I used to know someone. Nice kid, about... two years younger than me; name's Kuchera. He was always that weak and helpless type; you know." – The others nodded. – "He too was bullied, as far as I can remember, right from when he started school. Sometimes, he told me how much he hated being like that and not being able to do anything against it. I wasn't that close to anyone back then, but... I guess you could call him my first friend. Anyway, he eventually got sick of always being a target and decided he couldn't take it anymore."

"There was this high schooler, out of a family with some really dangerous types. Some three years ago, he started harassing Kuchera for protection money."

Hoodie immediately put his hand up in a 'stop' gesture. – "Wait. A high schooler collecting protection money?"

"And not the only one either. There were a bunch of those in the neighborhood; some tried shaking me down too, but I was too poor for that."

"Man, that's fucked up." – Hoodie remarked, shaking his head in disgust.

"Preaching to the choir, my friend. I lived in that neighborhood for eight years, so I can tell you that what you have here in Tokyo-2 is paradise when compared to that. I bet that, even if you've been to Europe, you never went into the slums, did you?"

"The outer districts here have some deep shit too, from what I hear." – someone called from the back.

"Maybe." – Kaworu replied with a shrug, though that statement did rouse his curiosity. – "Anyway, Kuchera eventually decided he didn't want to play along and called the guy a son of a bitch."

"And?"

"The bastard lost it. Broke Kuchera's nose, kicked him on the ground hard enough to crack one of his ribs, then hauled him off with his gorillas and beat him with a lead pipe."

Hoodie cringed. – "Holy shit..."

Kaworu made a bitter smile. – "I only found out later that the guy's mother was a former prostitute. So that insult struck a bit too close to home."

"What happened to your friend?"

"Broke his spine in two places. He's never going to walk again."

"Holy fucking shit." – Hoodie murmured with undisguised horror.

Kaworu slowly nodded. – "I never liked bullies... but that was what made me hate them. I don't want anyone else to end up like that. I mean, weak people are targeted because they can't defend themselves – but if they can't defend themselves, someone else's gotta do it for them." – He shifted his balance to his other leg. – "Survival of the fittest is complete bullshit. A couple centuries ago, they wouldn't have survived with what they have – but look at this world." – he said, gesturing towards the city. – "They could do so much more the way they are, yet they're stopped from doing so by those backward idiots who want to solve everything the old-fashioned way and happily drag everybody else down with themselves." – He shook his head in distaste. – "I'm sick of it all."
"I know how that feels, man." – Hoodie assured. – "We all feel the same way here. That's why we wanted to talk with you."

"What do you mean?"

"We've been thinking of doing something about that. A group of like-minded people would achieve more than lone wolves, right?"

"From what I hear, Freeman did a pretty good job at being a lone wolf." – the geek pitched in, rousing chuckling from the group.

"But he didn't do things alone." – Kaworu spoke up. – "The whole resistance pitched in."

"Damn right." – Hoodie agreed. – "So, what do you say? Should we gang up and do this thing together? I mean, we all have family, friends, some of us girlfriends; none of us want them to end up like your friend."

"Well..." – Kaworu began uncertainly. – "I don't have anything against the idea, but... I'm not sure you'd want me. I mean, what I would do might be a bit... extreme for you."

Hoodie shrugged. – "Maybe, maybe not. Anyway, name's Tokiwa. What do you have in mind?"

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Concerning Asuka's hair color: Yoshiyuki Sadamoto's concept art on pages 3 and 20 of the original proposal for the Evangelion TV series portrayed her with somewhat brownish hair. I seem to recall something about the animation team drawing her with her signature orange hair entirely by accident born out of miscommunication, but I can't remember where I heard that, so it should be taken with a grain of salt. What I can say with absolute certainty is that Asuka's canon hair color is actually not red but strawberry blond (that is, heavily red-tinted blond but still a distinctly lighter shade than true red hair) and Sadamoto drew her with blond hair in the manga. Here, she is straight-up blond, inherited from her father. Her mother was still a redhead, but that doesn't mean Asuka would necessarily be a redhead too: genetics-wise, red hair is recessive and can remain hidden for multiple generations before being expressed in a descendant. Her being blond was not a result of a sudden impulse or anything like that, but a holdover from the very early concept plans for this story.

Everything considered, it can be said that what you are reading right now is version 2.1 of something that came to my mind circa 2006. The first concept – version 0.1, if you will – was of a story rather similar to Homeworld. This was before I even heard about that game, so I was rather miffed at finding out that it was already done before.

Version 0.2 was when Half-Life came into the picture, evolving the concept into a Star Trek-esque space opera with HL characters (never seen Star Trek, but that's the best comparison I know of). This was the first one I wrote down notes for; I no longer have those.

Version 0.3 formed in 2007, a year or so before I saw NGE for the first time – and in hindsight, I'm glad I did. Originally, it wasn't an Eva story, just heavily inspired by it tech-wise. No character archetypes were carried over and I only finished two character concepts before moving on, no story whatsoever. The concept of a blond pilot girl comes from this one. No notes remain from this one either.
Then sometime in 2008, I decided to just go and turn it into an Eva fic, reaching back to the HL roots to establish a fusion between the two verses. And in 2010, I started writing version 1.0, titled Ascension Tetralogy at the time. While it had the same cast, it was quite different from SCE. For starters, it was a Super Robot story to the core, born out of my experiences with TTGL and Nobody Dies. Kaworu’s character was that of a blatantly and deliberately stereotypical hotblooded dumbass with memetic!Kamina vibes, including calling his attacks and being overly theatrical. The Evas were also much more organic and Super Robot-y in nature. I actually managed to write this one all the way up to the Israfel battle before I had a mental breakdown and dumped it, as I had gotten fed up with cranking out over 150,000 words and receiving no feedback whatsoever (partly because of how little traffic this site's crossover section receives), feeling like I was working my ass off for nothing. Simply put, I was completely, utterly sick of it. I fucking hated it with a passion and regret that I ever made the choice to start writing fanfiction instead of only reading it. I still have the original, unedited chapters for this one, but not the notes; the chapters I’m going to keep for the foreseeable future, as my sempais, Gundam Kaiser and Marq FJA, both asked to look at them. There were some minor rewrites, but nothing worth noting here.

The thought of restarting came to me in 2012. Gradually, version 2.0 started forming in my mind. It was at this point that the story got retitled to Strategic Cyborg Evangelion, symbolically turning a new page. It was mostly identical to the current version, although Kaworu was still more confident than right now, and had a tendency to go on Hitler-like rants if he worked himself up. This attempt at rewriting gradually died off from lack of interest and motivation, starting back up last year. It was in last December that I decided the problem was not merely in the execution, but in the roots as well, and decided to remedy that by starting over from the beginning and fixing those problems instead of trying to write around them like before. I feel Kaworu’s current portrayal does his character and Akira Ishida’s supreme voice acting talent far more justice than before.
"You called, my Lord?"

"Sachie has gone missing. He was never known for his punctuality, yet his current absence is beyond my expectations."

"You have need of him?"

"He has his uses."

"What do you wish of me, then?"

"Find him and drag him back here. By force, if necessary. Leliel will provide transportation. Now go."

"Your will be done, Lord Sammael."

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**Geofront, AEL Headquarters**  
**October 11, 2041**  
**1743 hours**

"I thought you might need to get a feel for our day-to-day operations, seeing as you will be present for a while. Speaking of which, did your superiors mention how long the observation period will last?" – Yui asked as she made her way down a corridor, a pair of technicians headed in the opposite direction making way for her with a small bow of respect.

"Nope." – Shephard answered from behind her, passing by the techs with a nod. – "Did they tell you?"

"No."

"Thought so. I mean, you're a civvie; they ain't going to tell you anything if they don't have to. No offense." – he added, catching up to her.

"None taken." – she replied without turning around. – "In any case, we have a routine sync test scheduled for the Evangelions. That is what we're here to observe."

"Which is?"

"You can think of it as maintenance. For the pilot, that is."

"Okay..." – he said slowly after a pause. – "I have no idea what that means."

"Did you read the material I sent you?"

Shephard made an 'oops' expression at that. – "...kinda."

The meaning behind his tone was obvious... and Yui didn't fail to notice, if her glare back at him was of any indication.
"Hey, I'm not a scientist! Most of it flew right over my head."

Yui sighed. – "Did you at least read the part about the neural interface?"

"Yeah, I remember that one."

"The primary factor at piloting an Evangelion isn't prior experience itself; simply being trained doesn't help without being able to put that training to use. What matters the most is the sync ratio: it's a measure of how attuned the pilot is to the Evangelion. The higher it is, the faster the response times – but at the same time, the higher the sensory feedback."

"You're starting to lose me there, doc."

"Evangelions, like humans, are capable of feeling pain if their organic tissue is damaged." – she explained patiently. – "If a pilot is synchronized at the time of the injury, he or she will feel that pain too, proportionally to the sync ratio."

"So... if one of these things get shot..." – Shephard began.

"The pilot will feel being shot, yes." – Yui finished. – "There's no actual danger to the pilot; it is just a sensation."

"Is it really necessary?"

"We don't really have a choice; disconnecting somatosensory feedback would, for example, deaden feeling in the hands to the point the pilot wouldn't feel how strong the Evangelion's grip is and might end up accidentally crushing whatever is in its hand at the time." – She passed through the door into a room with a set of large windows at the far end, behind a wall of consoles currently tended to by a small army of technicians. – "Besides, it might actually be beneficial."

"How could feeling phantom pain possibly be beneficial?" – Shephard pointed out skeptically.

"Self-preservation instinct. It would both make the pilot fight harder and motivate him or her to avoid being hit in the first place, thereby indirectly reducing maintenance costs. At the point feedback would pose any actual threat, the pilot would have other things to worry about." – She turned to the crew and gave out orders in Japanese.

While she was busy, Shephard glanced out of the window. The room behind was significantly larger than the one he was currently in, although most of it was taken up by a number of... he couldn't really tell; slots for something. That theory was supported by the fact that two of the slots currently housed a large cylinder each, stenciled 00 and 01. Both were held in a diagonal position, albeit the one bearing 00 had a large piece of its top removed and held apart from the main hull by a set of four actuator arms connecting the two.

Once he heard the commotion behind him settling down, he turned to Yui. – "Is it normal for the crew to speak like that?" – he asked, referring to the technicians' choice of language.

"The majority of employees working at this facility are Japanese; it's only natural they would be using their native language." – Yui replied. – "You don't speak it, I presume?"

"Wasn't part of the requirements for enlisting."

That answer was one she didn't expect. – "There are language requirements in the military?"

The man shrugged, dropping himself into an empty seat in front of an unmanned terminal. – "Only
for commissioned officers. Fluent in English, at least passable in either Russian or Chinese. I had to learn Russian when they promoted me to second lieutenant." – he admitted, secretly amused at the clear surprise on her face.

"Why not Chinese?"

"No way in hell I'd be able to pronounce that level of moonspeak, doc." – he quipped, leaning back as far as his seat would allow. – "No offense."

"None taken."

"My mother-in-law was Japanese, though, so my wife knew the language herself. But it's not like she can translate for me, considering that she's been dead for quite a while now."

"I know."

"Let me guess: you looked up my file."

Yui just smiled. – "What kind of scientist would I be if I didn't do my research?"

"Point taken." – Shephard stretched himself with a sigh. – "But enough about me; am I right in assuming these Evangelions have weapons other than stomping their victims into the ground?"

"Correct." – Yui tapped something on her tablet and the holographic display of the terminal Shephard was sitting at suddenly turned on, slightly startling him as a three-dimensional image of an Evangelion materialized barely a meter from his face. – "We've decided to use the same approach as contemporary battleframe designs by utilizing hand-held weaponry instead of integrated, giving greater tactical flexibility. Of course, part of that decision arose from the fact that, due to the Evangelions' very nature, there is little to no internal space for weaponry or ammunition. Even the power source has to be carried externally. The only integrated weapons as of now are a pair of MK225 autocannons, located in the clavicle armor." – Two spots were highlighted on the hologram's upper chest. – "In the final mass-production version, we intend to relocate these to the head for easier use."

"Why did you put them into the chest for these ones, then?"

"To test for balance and mechanical reliability first. We wanted to finalize the weapon before completing the final helmet design, in order to ensure there is enough space for it and its ammunition."

"Gun first, chassis later?" – he guessed.

"Yes." – Piece by piece, the armor of the holographic Evangelion separated and flew away from the main body to reveal a featureless humanoid body beneath. Only the helmet stayed on. – "The same is true for the Evangelion as well: the armor is built around the body, not the body being forced into the armor."

"How much does it restrict movement? The armor, I mean."

"Based on our previous observations and pilot debriefing, next to none. With that said, the armor does have a built-in feature to lock all joints and turn rigid. Makes transportation of the Evangelion while offline easier." – Armored once more, the hologram rotated to a vertical position and got encased into a skeletal structure not unlike a stretcher.

"You guys thought of everything, huh?" – Shephard murmured.
"Maybe, maybe not. In any case, handheld weaponry will account for most of an Evangelion's equipment."

"What kind of weapons are we talking about? Because I seriously hope you have something better than a sword."

Yui gave the man a 'really?' look. – "Colonel, this isn't a toy robot from a Saturday morning cartoon, this is a military weapon. Of course it is designed for ranged combat."

"Good."

"Of course, not all of the Evangelion's non-weapon equipment can be swapped in the field. That is why we had to draft some preliminary loadout packages as well."

His eyebrows immediately shot up. – "You aren't even finished with this and you're already thinking about variants?"

"Not the kind of variants you are thinking of. In the final mass-production design, the entire external makeup of the Evangelion, everything outside the organic body, will be modular and can be replaced with no modification to the internals. Think of it as how fighter aircraft can be outfitted with equipment like ECM pods or external fuel tanks to make it able to carry out different mission profiles. The aircraft's frame and body isn't changed, only supplemented by external addons."

Shephard casually waved her off. – "I'm not navy, but I get it. What kind of loadouts are we talking about?"

The hologram turned to the side and wheeled apparatuses appeared on its calves. – "The Class-B High Mobility Type was used as the comparison baseline while designing the others. It mounts standard-issue armor of alternating layers of composite alloys and electric reactive armor, giving a fairly heavy degree of protection without seriously compromising mobility. We also managed to upscale and mount a pair of storm rollers on the legs, although I do not recommend using them in an urban environment." – The apparatuses rotated around the Evangelion's heels into a rollerskate-like position. Several close-ups from multiple angles appeared next to it, one of them revealing a dual ring of spikes running down the circumference of each wheel. – "We had to add these in order to achieve the traction necessary to move the Evangelion's mass, but it will seriously damage the terrain. Even reinforced concrete will be pulverized if this rolls over it, much less ordinary pavement." – The hologram then highlighted the Evangelion's shoulders, with a cross-section appearing next to it. Another highlight, this time in the upper part of the cross-section, was accompanied by the image of a blade with rocket boosters and a retracting cable on the rear. – "A pair of shoulder-mounted storage racks carry one combat knife and one assault harpoon each. We considered an additional pair of assault harpoons on the forearms as well, but decided against it due to possible interference with weapon handling."

Shephard just nodded. Storm rollers and assault harpoons were both familiar technologies to him, as Durandal battleframes have been using both. They were the very reason why it was considered a successful design: storm rollers allowed it to move at speeds more akin to a sports car on the highway (although with considerably worse handling, of course) – fast enough to make it considerably more difficult to target its legs, the very weakness why pre-Impact militaries and analysts dismissed the giant robot as a practical battlefield weapon in the first place. Even its predecessor, the Mk-II Gugnir, was forced to rely on the terrain for protecting its legs by crouching behind the skyline in the legged analogue of a tank's hull-down position. Then again, the Gugnir was basically just an assault gun on digitigrade legs, designed for all-terrain artillery support, whereas the Durandal was an infantry-fighting vehicle to the core, designed for street-to-street urban combat. It wasn't just their role that differentiated them, but their size as well: the five-meter Durandal was about thigh-height to a
Gugnir, thanks to its aneutronic second-generation deuterium/helium-3 fusion reactor requiring much less radiation shielding than a Gugnir’s first-generation deuterium/tritium one. Of course, it also meant that the Confederate military was dependent on offworld helium-3 mines – like the ones on the Moon – if they wanted to run their newest toys.

Though Shephard had a feeling an Evangelion wouldn’t be able to use its assault harpoons as an impromptu grappling hook for scaling buildings. A Durandal was barely heavier than the average car, so it was light enough... but an Evangelion looked more like something with the weight of a frigate. – "What about the others?"

The hologram changed, this time into an Evangelion clad in bulky armor and a large shield. – "Class-C Area Defense Type. Mounts extra armor and a hand-carried reactive armor shield, plus the shoulder racks were redesigned as well: the assault harpoons have been stripped out and replaced with ammunition storage for a top-mounted autocannon for anti-air, anti-missile and anti-artillery point defense. We considered integrating a powered exoskeleton to compensate for the armor’s weight, but it would’ve been too expensive."

"You mean even more expensive than it already is." – the man snarked.

Yui ignored that remark. – "Next." – The hologram changed again, this time into a bulky, mechanical contraption with two massive pillar-like vertical protrusions from its back. Shephard almost didn’t spot the Evangelion’s head, jutting out of a hole in the thing’s chest. – "The powered exoskeleton design was eventually recycled into the Class-F Heavy Fire Support Type. It is, for all intents and purposes, an Evangelion-piloted powered armor designed for bringing to bear the maximum amount of firepower possible. Of course, hand-carried weaponry is all but impossible at this scale, so we fell back to integrating the weaponry into the exoskeleton itself."

"Big ones?" – he asked with barely concealed glee.

"Three rotary autocannons per arm, fourteen-barrel missile launchers on the shoulders and a pair of back-mounted heavy railguns."

A long silence followed after that listing.

"...wow. You guys don't screw around." – Shephard remarked finally.

"Unfortunately, the extreme weight of this loadout severely affects mobility; even with a quartet of storm rollers on each feet," – The hologram shifted to highlight all eight, attached to a pair of massive feet. – "it is barely capable of keeping up with another Evangelion that is walking at a normal pace."

"Can this thing walk under its own power?"

Yui nodded. – "Yes, although very slowly. We also have a loadout focused in the opposite direction: the Class-A Flight Type."

The man's eyebrows promptly shot up to his hairline.

"These things can fly?"

Yui made a ‘not quite’ gesture and turned the hologram into a lightly-built Evangelion with a massive backpack. – "It's more like a jumpjet attachment, consisting of two thruster packs with four engines each." – The hologram highlighted the backpack and produced a close-up of the two vertical packs. Then panels on the sides of the packs opened and a quartet of thrusters emerged from inside. – "No new development here; these are frigate-grade thrust-vectorized plasmajet engines directly derived from the ones currently in use by the navy. I won't bore you with the technical details, which I
believe would be quite uninteresting to you. Due to weight and lack of aerodynamics, however, a flying Evangelion wouldn't be anywhere near conventional aircraft in terms of speed or maneuverability. Even to achieve flight in the first place, the armor has to be partially removed."

"Hm. Win some, lose some, I guess. What about spaceflight?"

Yui made an exasperated sigh. – "Colonel, this is a land-based weapon system we're talking about. If anyone pulls that insanity off, I'll buy a drink for him."

The corner of Shephard's mouth curled upwards. – "Do I hear a challenge there?"

"Hear whatever you want, my opinion is unchanged." – She shook her head. – "Honestly... Evangelions in space..."

"I take it you haven't watched Robotech when you were a kid, then?"

One row to the front, Hyuga's head perked up. – "You mean Macross? That series is ancient."

"Hey, I grew up on that stuff!" – Shephard replied with a hint of indignation before turning back to Yui. – "Anyway, giant robots can work in space."

"Not to mention that Gundam already worked out the hows on it with AMBAC." – Hyuga added. Shephard slowly looked back at him, wearing a blank expression. – "Am-what?"

"Active Mass Balance Auto-Control. Basically, limbs can be used as counterweights to turn around in zero gravity without expending fuel. It works on the same physical principles as the attitude-control reaction wheels used in spacecraft."

"...ah. Sounds nifty."

"Those are fictional television shows; this is real life." – Yui interrupted impatiently. – "There's a difference."

"Ma'am, that's what they said about battleframes and FTL travel too." – Hyuga pointed out. – "Impractical and impossible, respectively; tell that to the people who routinely use them every day."

"Anyway." – Shephard interjected. – "Got any more toys?"

Yui silently rolled her eyes and tapped her tablet again, turning the hologram back into its initial state, minus storm rollers and with different shoulder equipment. – "Class-G Marksman Type, functionally identical to the Class-B but drops the storm rollers and assault harpoons, as well as replaces the off-hand shoulder rack with a rifle mount. The other rack is outfitted with an advanced targeting system that contains a separate sensor suite and fire control computer."

"All you need is a ghillie suit and you'd have the world's biggest sniper there, I think." – Shephard remarked. – "Key word: biggest."

"Quite so. Unfortunately, we cannot manufacture wearable camouflage for an Evangelion at this time... not for the lack of trying, mind you."

Shephard stretched himself again. – "You tried, then?" – he asked.

The hologram shifted again but aside from the shoulders going back to normal, no other change was apparent. – "Class-E Electronic Warfare Type. Aside from mounting state-of-the-art ECM, ECCM, as well as special armor treated with a radar-absorbent coating, we also experimented with
holographic adaptive camouflage. Unfortunately, we do not have experts in our ranks, so the results have been less than satisfactory. I'm afraid this loadout won't be ready for deployment before the mass-production model Evangelions roll out."

"Not surprising. I hear the navy's been experimenting with this a few years ago and they couldn't make it work either, despite having experts."

"Yes, that is where we got the inspiration from."

"I heard about that too." – Hyuga spoke up, turning around in his seat again. – "They gave up because they realized that even if they cloak, stealth-coat and heat-insulate a ship, gravimetrics can still see it just fine. Nobody could figure out how to trick that."

"Thank you, mister Hyuga." – Yui turned back to Shephard; Hyuga, having gotten the message from her impatient tone, went back to his own work. – "Still, an electronic warfare suite and radar stealth does have its uses, so this loadout could be used by officers until we finish the camouflage."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, actually." – he pointed out. – "I mean, any competent soldier would target the officer first – and if I see one guy hanging back and trying to make a deliberate effort to stay under the radar, I'd shoot him first. I mean, there's got to be a reason he's doing that."

"Would you put the officer to the front, then?" – Yui asked.

"No. I'd make it so that it's impossible to tell who's the officer. The enemy is already gonna be gunning for him as it is, so giving him mission-critical equipment means it's going to hurt the team even more if he gets incapacitated. Besides, ordering people around will give him enough work as it is, no need to burden him even more by having him also do other stuff."

"I see. Thank you for your input." – And Yui meant that. She recognized that she was a scientist, not a tactician; designing equipment and figuring out the optimal use for them were two different things.

"What else should I know? Weaknesses or such?"

"Actually, we encountered problems with finding an optimal power supply. Currently, sixteen hours is the maximum operational time we can give you, though we worked out a way to refuel on the field. Otherwise, weapons of mass destruction are the fastest way to destroy an Evangelion. Even then, their immune system is capable of defeating every known mutation of every microbe on Earth, while chemical weapons have to eat through the armor first."

"That still leaves nukes."

"Presuming you find a general insane enough to waste nuclear weapons on a single Eva, that is." – muttered Hyuga, not turning around this time to avoid antagonizing his boss with his interruptions any further.

"Believe me, there are more of them than you'd think." – Shephard deadpanned before turning back to Yui. – "You know what? I'll be honest: you guys are nothing like what I expected. Biotech company, my ass; if even half of what you told me is true, you've basically built some unholy fusion between Godzilla and Iron Man! I can see why some people call you the second Black Mesa."

"Whatever they may call us, I can assure you that we have no intention of ending up like that." – she replied dryly.

Shephard snorted. – "Yeah, I'm pretty sure all the science guys working for BM said that too."
"Unlike them, however, our work isn't theoretical." – Yui argued. – "We don't work merely for the benefit of science, but for the betterment of humanity as well."

"By building these doomwalkers? You'll excuse me if I say I kinda can't see how this would benefit humanity."

"Colonel, I'm not foolish enough to think there won't be any more wars in our time. Recent history taught us better than to be naive like that." – She turned towards the observation window. – "If God doesn't want to give us a better future, we'll just have to build it ourselves. That is what artificial evolution is all about: instead of waiting for random variables, we force the change ourselves. I'm not playing God here; it's more like 'doing what should be God's job'."

"Do you believe in God?" – Shephard posed the question.

"My daughter does, but I don't share her beliefs; science and theism don't mix well."

Nothing more was said between them, the silence only being interrupted by Yui's sporadic orders to the crew – which left Shephard's mind free to wander.

'She's right. If there is a God, how could He let Black Mesa happen? He probably thought 'fuck it, these idiots don't deserve my time, let them kill each other for all I care'.' He shook his head at that thought. 'If that's the case, I can kinda understand where the guy would be coming from. Black Mesa... what a clusterfuck. I dunno who ordered the nuke – maybe the president, maybe the secretary of defense; whoever it was, I hope he got his ass fried well-done by whatever happened to the US.'

Information about other parts of the world was scarce during the Combine occupation – but after gaining their freedom, humanity was quite a bit surprised to learn that the entirety of North and Central America, as well as a sizable chunk of the Eastern Pacific, dropped right off the map. Not destroyed or plundered by the invaders, just... gone, covered by a permanent portal storm the likes of which was never seen before or since. Portal storms have been a semi-regular occurrence for decades now, materializing for no apparent reason and marching across the countryside, wreaking havoc on a level akin to a large tornado... except tornadoes don't spew exotic radiation and cause random time dilation in their immediate surroundings, nor are their destructive effects focused around a brutal barrage of lightning strikes and freak gravitational anomalies powerful enough to pulverize concrete and rip fissures into the ground.

They did have one thing in common with tornadoes, however: the short warning time before one struck. It was eventually discovered that the formation of a portal storm left its distinctive signature in the Earth's magnetic field, allowing precision equipment to forecast one several hours prior to its manifestation. Lots of lives have been saved by the Confederate government's decision to permanently reopen the old Vostok research station in Antarctica and take advantage of its proximity to the Earth's southern magnetic pole by equipping it with the most sensitive magnetometers ever built to forecast portal storms.

It was likely that a similar facility would've been build in Northern Canada, near the northern magnetic pole... were it not for the Eye of Xen, as the gigantic vortex came to be called. For there was no doubt that it was a leftover from Second Impact, as its center perfectly overlapped with the former location of Black Mesa. What was going on inside was a complete mystery: no satellite could see past the shroud and all probes attempting to penetrate the outer boundary were buffeted by supersonic winds before being ripped apart by tidal forces, no matter whether they approached on the ground, underground, on the sea, underwater, in the air, or even reentering the atmosphere from above. All that could be seen from was a massive, ominous cloud wall, rotating several times faster hurricanes were physically capable of, crowned by a permanent aurora above. And at night, the
entire vortex pulsed in an eerie blue light, green lightning cascading along the wall so rapidly that it looked as if the cloud was vibrating. During solar flares, the Eye's electrical activity intensified so much that it temporarily yanked the planet's magnetic field out of alignment and covered half the planet in aurorae.

Most of the anomalous activity dropped in frequency during the Occupation, only to rapidly return barely a few months into the Great Revolution. Some scientists believed that the Combine Citadels somehow stabilized local spacetime, as evidenced by the rise in activity levels corresponding to their deactivation; how exactly did they do that, on the other hand, was anyone's guess. It was unlikely a solution could be found any time soon, so efforts were concentrated around building storm shelters instead, which also doubled as civil defense shelters.

After a few minutes of watching the technicians in obvious boredom, Shephard quietly got up and rounded the terminal he was formerly sitting at. – "Your name's Hyuga, right?"

"Uh... y-yes, sir." – Hyuga answered, slightly startled from having been addressed so suddenly.

"First, can the 'sir'; I work for a living. Second, you seem like someone who has an ear to the ground. Care for a drink after your shift's over?"

---

Same time

"You can't be serious!"

"I am."

"Why would Hikari like that stooge?" – Asuka demanded as she walked out of the kitchen, head and left shoulder pinching the phone to her ear while her hands were occupied by a pair of bottles. – "He's, like, a hundred years too early to be boyfriend material!"

"I can't really say." – Mari quipped on the other side of the line. – "They're not childhood friends or anything; he lived in Osaka until a few years ago. Think it's love at first sight?"

Asuka sighed, setting down the bottles on her nightstand. – "More like love at first punch. Slap. Whatever."

The other girl chuckled. – "You might be right on that. Soooo... what do you think about Kaworu-kun?"

"Must we talk about that prick too?" – the blond grumbled, dropping onto her bed with a frustrated scowl.

She could practically hear the cat-like smile from the other side of the phone. – "What's the matter, ohime-san? Sensitive topic?"

"I don't like that guy, okay? He can thank my dad I haven't tossed him off the balcony yesterday."

"What did he do to piss you off that much?"

"He called me flat."

A long silence came from the phone. – "...that's it?"

"Do I look like flat to you?" – Before Mari could answer, Asuka immediately corrected herself. – "Wait, don't answer that. Wrong person to ask."
"Well, you aren't exactly a porn queen, you know."

Asuka scowled. – "Thanks for the vote of confidence. But anyway, there's nothing wrong with my breasts! They're perfectly average and that freak calls them flat? Did he grew up with his face stuffed between your tits, or what?!"

"If that happened, I would know of it." – After a short pause, the other girl added – "Not that I wouldn't enjoy it..." – in a clearly seductive tone.

Asuka's jaw hung wide open at that. – "...tell me you're kidding."

"I am."

"Seriously, what the hell is his problem?" – Asuka continued, partly to busy herself with something other than the disturbingly kinky mental image the other girl just gave her. – "And since when are you on a first-name basis with that creep?"


Asuka was literally half a second away from spitting out that she read those books too when she was a child, but ultimately decided against it. – "Whatever. Just don't tell me you've got a thing for him."

"I don't. But he's got quite the fan group."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard about that too. I really have no idea what the hell they all see in him."

"He doesn't seem to care, though. The only girl I ever saw him talk to was Ikari."

Asuka raised a puzzled eyebrow. – "The blue-haired chick? What's her deal, anyway?"

"I dunno, but she's got knives."

Asuka sat up, reaching for one of the bottles she brought into her room. – "Knives?"

"Knives."

Silence.

"Knives." – Asuka repeated, just to make absolutely sure she heard it correctly.

"Yup."

Seemed like she did. – "...so she's a weirdo."

"Nya, something like that. Anyway, Kaworu-kun's been here for barely a few weeks and he's already in cahoots with the daughter of the biggest corporate CEO in town? I call shenanigans."

Asuka sipped from her drink. – "Think he's a gold digger?"

"Well, I don't know. He seems like a nice guy."

The blond scoffed at that. – "Haven't you heard? Nice guys finish last."

For those not familiar with Half-Life canon, Shephard was a 22 years old corporal in the USMC
at the time of Second Impact. Since details are sketchy on him, I did some research into Marine
recruitment and training procedures; my headcanon is that he went through MCRD San Diego
and Camp Pendleton for boot camp and infantry training, respectively, before getting his final
posting. That final posting was the (nonexistent in real life) Santego Military Base Hazardous
Environment Combat Unit he ended up at it canon. Again, for those not familiar with HL canon,
HECU was the military cleanup & cover-up detail sent to Second Impact's ground zero; Shep's
transport was shot down before he could receive his orders to treat all Black Mesa personnel as
witnesses and terminate them on sight. The one superior officer he met during the whole incident
didn't give him any orders either and bugged out a few minutes later on the last transport
outbound from the facility. Fanon consensus is that while Shephard should've been able to
deduce his orders by watching his fellow soldiers, he simply chose not to act on them.

Anti-artillery CIWS is an existing real-life technology, dating all the way back to 2000 when the
US and Israel jointly developed a laser-based prototype (THEL) that successfully intercepted
Katyusha rockets and artillery shells mid-flight. Development of this particular example was later
discontinued due to budget issues and the entire gear's impractically large size. In late 2014, the
US Navy successfully field-tested a laser weapon prototype built by defense contractor Kratos
Defense & Security Solutions, Inc; this particular example is accurate enough to destroy RPG
rounds, even though it's little more than six industrial-grade, solid-state welding lasers strapped
together.
No picture or human painting ever did judgment to the void between stars. And no matter how many times he had seen this sight, he never really got used to it. The stars shined ahead and behind him, over his head and beneath his feet, never the same between warps; flying a few lightyears in any direction inevitably changed the skyline, rendering familiar constellations unrecognizable. Still, he kept coming, as if space was but an open book to his expanded consciousness, waiting for him to divine that which is yet to come.

He felt the presence even before the man walked up to him from behind.

"Speak."

The order was short and weak, the former being a testament to his thousand years old dialect being barely legible to his subordinates, the latter being a testament to a combination of his advanced age and a thousand years of loneliness. When one thinks about or wishes for longevity of the kind he had to endure, they usually don't consider the full ramifications of watching one's loved ones and friends grow old and die, doomed to never make lasting connections for lack of companions who can accompany them throughout life.

Well... lack of companions from outside his family, that is. He literally had over a thousand descendants, the majority of them alive and of various ages. If there was one good thing to living for more than a thousand years, it was being able to share it with every single one of them. Of course, he also had to watch them grow old alongside him, with even his great-great-grandchildren looking like hundred years old humans.

That's just how their kind was: long-lived, but not immortal. He could've achieved true immortality; it had always been within his grasp. But after everything he had seen and lived through, he just felt tired. Tired of everything, wanting nothing more than to just close his eyes and sleep until eternity's end.

And yet, fate still wasn't letting him have his way.

"My Lord, we received an emergency broadcast from the Kadesh Sanctuary. The outer defense line is reporting an incursion; they're holding the line for now, but the main invasion force is vectoring in on the system. They require immediate relief." — the officer reported, fourth-generation neo-Terran dialect smoothly flowing from his lips, his sterile white uniform in stark contrast with the observer's gray medical pod and the darkness outside.

A small sigh came from the observer, as if a piece of his very soul left his ancient body. — "Set course."

The man bowed. — "Yes, my Lord."

As his underling turned to leave, he turned his attention back to the stars, the wrinkles of age around his eyes tightening. 'Today was the day, all those centuries ago.' he mused.

'To humanity, the beginning of the end. To me, the prelude to despair.'
A single black point appeared over the ocean, staying perfectly still for nearly a minute before rapidly expanding into an infinitely thin black disc. – "We're here."

A moment later, the massive bulk of Shamshel fell out of the hole in reality and crashed into the ocean. – "Could you drop me somewhere closer?"

"You can fly, can't you?" – Leliel asked back with a devil-may-care attitude not unlike that of a smartass teenager chewing bubblegum. Except without the bubblegum, of course.

Shamshel rose from the water, not even noticing the several dozen Xenian leeches futilely trying to chew on her skin. – "Watch that tone."

"Or you'll do what, sic the Oathbreaker on me?"

"Do you truly think he would lower himself to dealing with the likes of you?" – Shamshel pointed out with a scoff. – "Don't make me laugh."

"What's up, Shamshel? Not in the mood to go hide behind your big brother today?"

"Enough of this." – Shamshel snapped. – "Stay here while I find that idiot Sachiel. Don't you dare move an atom."

"Right-o." – The black disc immediately shrunk back into the black dot it appeared as, hovering unseen over the ocean. As soon as the other Angel was out of psychic earshot, Leliel chuckled to herself in dark amusement that was anything but teen-like. – "Oh, this is going to be good..."

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Tokyo-2, Inner District 5
1221 hours

Kaworu lazily fiddled with his pen, suppressing a yawn in the process. School was boring as usual, listening to the old coot drone on and on about how life was during the Occupation. It was the same old story he'd heard all throughout his life: the often-repeated incidents of Civil Protection breaking down the door in the middle of the night to search for insurgents in a random home, beating whoever they found inside for hours trying to wring out a confession, then taking them away anyway when the subject, lying in a pool of their own blood, piss and shit, refused to confess; sadistic officers randomly stopping people on the street for frisking and public humiliation or just kicking over a trashcan and gleefully ordering their hapless victim to clean up the mess, beating them when they didn't comply; enforcing curfew with lethal force, shooting on sight at anyone hapless enough to be caught outside after sundown... from the early years, there were even reports of teenage girls being kidnapped and gangraped daily until they starved to death, although these particular incidents progressively disappeared as natural aging and the global reproductive suppression field preventing new births cut off the supply of victims. Records captured after the Uprising revealed that most of these were just acts of plain sadism, what with one of the Combine's first acts after subjugating Earth having been releasing the most nastiest of criminals from the nastiest prisons around the planet, giving them just enough mental conditioning to keep them from going on a killing spree and conscripting them into Civil Protection, killing all who refused.

Most didn't.
Said records also revealed that these atrocities were entirely unsanctioned but also unregulated by the alien overlords in charge of Earth at the time, as while they served no practical purpose, dousing the resultant corpses with enough acid to make them barely recognizable as human, then dumping the remains into the middle of the street in broad daylight, did wonders at keeping the populace scared out of their minds during every waking hour. Yet again, an example of how creative man can be when it comes to hurting his own kind... until the rest of humanity fully realized that they massively outnumbered the Combine's planetary garrison forces, that is.

While Tōji liked to point out that what the old geezer holding the class did to them on a frequent basis was just as evil, Kaworu was pretty sure it wasn't quite the same.

Said goofball was currently lying face-down in a small puddle of his own saliva accumulated on his desk, quietly snoring. Next to him, Kensuke was playing a game on his tablet (something about armies of giant robots fighting on a strategy map; the interface was all Japanese, so Kaworu had no idea what was going on), concentrating so deeply as to be completely oblivious to the world around him. Hikari tried to keep order at first, but even she realized a waste of effort when she saw it, stopping her halfhearted attempts after a while; right now, most of the class were unofficially free to do whatever they wanted for as long as they kept the noise level near-silent, with violators swiftly invoking her (quiet) wrath.

'Eight minutes left.'

Letting out a sigh, Kaworu turned his eyes away from the clock and perused the class for anything interesting. With nothing to do, his eyes fell on the waterfall of blond hair only a few desks away. He still didn't know what to make of Asuka; the girl was simply impossible to figure out. Whenever he observed her without her aware of his presence, she looked and acted like a completely normal girl... but the instant she found him, she went on the offensive with biting remarks and uncalled-for comments. Her behavior when alone or with the class rep and that other girl was clear evidence that she was capable of acting otherwise, yet why was she so bitchy?

It was times like these that Kaworu cursed his lack of experience with girls. Not that he particularly yearned for a girlfriend, it's just that a couple of things about the other gender seemed like inexplicable enigmas without anyone to ask.

Such as why Asuka looked briefly at her tablet, then promptly turned around to glare at him. She then scribbled something onto a sheet of paper before holding it up in his direction to reveal a message: **STOP STARING AT ME, CREEP!**

Kaworu rolled his eyes and turned to stare out the window. Not that there was much to see outside either; the cityscape was currently draped in a gray curtain of rain.

He barely caught from the corner of his eye Rei's head suddenly perking up, a split second before a deep, powerful noise rippled through the classroom from outside.

Psychological warfare was always an effective one. Hence why, despite opposition by veterans for whom the sound brought back painful memories, the Confederate leadership somehow saw it fitting to use a digital recreation of a Combine Citadel's alarm klaxon as the civil defense alert. And it was undeniably powerful: merely hearing the deep, mechanical pulse was enough to awaken a primal fear even in people who weren't alive yet to hear the original.

Hikari instantly snapped into action. – "Class, form up! We're going to the shelter. Leave everything and do as the drills said! **Move it!**"

The next thing Kaworu knew was Rei appearing out of nowhere in front of him. – "We have to go."
"Report." – Yui snapped off crisply as she marched into the control center, Shephard on her heels.

"Contact over Sagami Bay." – Aoba replied. – "Detectable gravimetric signature, same pattern as the one from last month."

"Where did it come from?"

"Unknown. It was picked up by satellites over the Solomon Sea a few hours ago; there's a minuscule gravimetric distortion in the area, but it's almost invisible against the Earth's mass shadow."

"The Iruma Military Spaceport in Saitama just went to full alert." – Hyuga added before his seat (plus him in it) and his keyboard slid to the side on tracks underneath them, stopping in front of another holographic screen. He resumed work at his new position without missing a beat. – "MAGI's picking up increased radio traffic; they're mobilizing everything."

"Call the pilots." – Yui ordered. – "And start launch preparations."

"Actually, Rei just called." – Maya interjected. – "She's inbound and has Nagisa with her."

"Smart girl." – Shephard quipped.

Yui ignored him. – "Then just start launch preparations."

"For which unit?"

"Both.

The technicians shared an uncertain glance with each other but turned back to their workstations. – "Yes, ma'am."

"Power in numbers?" – Shephard guessed.

"Not just that." – She started typing on her tablet before giving it to him. – "These arrived the day before yesterday and should give us an additional advantage."

Shephard looked at the screen and whistled. – "Sweet."

"Do you have anything to pass the time with? Music or something?"

"Depends. Do you like Japanese pop music?"

"Never even heard any, so I have no idea." – Asuka let out an annoyed sigh, resting her chin on top of her knees. – "Why the hell did we have to come down here, anyway?"

"You mean you haven't heard?" – Hikari asked.

"Heard what?"
"Something happened in the city a few weeks ago." – Mari supplied, stretching herself with a satisfied groan. Asuka had to actively resist glancing at her friend's pronounced chest. – "Alarm out of nowhere in the middle of the day, we got sent down here, then the ground started shaking as if a whole bloody army opened up on the city. In fact, I think that might be what happened: when we came back up, there were bomb craters everywhere. I heard a few buildings were knocked down altogether in the next district over."

Asuka remained silent for a few moments before humming in thought. – "Huh. Did the news say anything?"

"Nothing. But something must have happened, considering that there are a lot of battleframes camping just outside the city."

"How do you know about that?"

Mari shrugged. – "Heard it on the internet, where else? Unlike you, my dad isn't in the military."

"Asuka." – Hikari spoke up quietly.

"What is it?"

"Do you... do you think your dad is somewhere up there? Fighting, I mean."

"I don't think so. He didn't tell me exactly what he was transferred in for, but he did tell me that it's a desk job. Besides, he's a lieutenant colonel; do you know the military's rank structure?"

"No."

"I do!" – Kensuke piped in from a few meters away.

Asuka rolled her eyes. – "Wasn't asking you." – She turned back to Hikari. – "Anyway, he's one rank below the highest one allowed to be present in a combat zone. But that still doesn't mean he's going to be right in the thick of it; you can't really give out orders if the bad guys are shooting directly at you."

"Which unit is he assigned to, anyway?" – Kensuke asked.

Annoyance flashed across Asuka's face. – "I just said he transferred in not thirty seconds ago. Do you have anything between your ears or is that skull of yours hollow?"

"Hey, don't talk down to him like that!" – Tōji growled at her.

"I won't, if he stops asking stupid questions. Or is that beyond you two's mental faculties?"

Tōji's eyes narrowed and he flashed his middle finger at her. – "くたばれ、糞女！"

"SUZUHARA!" – Hikari exploded, drawing her paper fan from her sleeve as if she was unsheathing a sword. – "What kind of language is that?!!"

Five minutes later

"Sorry for the potty break, how are things up there?" – Shephard asked as he barged into the control room in a hurry.

"You have arrived just in the nick of time." – Yui replied. – "The military is breaking off."
"How bad is it?"

"60% casualties."

Shephard closed his eyes. – "...shit."

"Pilots are twenty minutes from the surface." – Maya reported.

"Are you sure it's okay for you to nose in on a military operation? I know, super-secret weapons project and everything, but–"

Yui looked almost smug at that. – "Three minutes ago, we received a message from White Forest. The government is officially requesting our assistance, with President Keel's personal signature."

"Huh." – Shephard hummed. – "Sounds like you've got friends in high places, doc."

"It never hurts to do so. Maya, open a channel to the pilots."

"Yes, ma'am."

Two windows opened on the main screen; one with Rei plucking a pair of earphones out of her ears, the other with a visibly bored Kaworu. – "Are we about to get there or something?"

"Mister Nagisa, do you have weapons training or any kind?" – Yui asked without missing a beat.

Kaworu sighed at that. – "I'm a teenager, not a soldier. How should I know how to use a weapon?" – he pointed out. – "I remember Unit-00 using knives when I came here, did you mean those?"

"I meant firearms. You just need to align the crosshair on your screen with the target and fire. Do you think you could handle that?"

The teen shrugged. – "I don't know. Maybe. That's what you gave me the cannon for, isn't it?"

"Yes. Your lack of experience in handling an Evangelion means it would be better to put you in a support role."

"May I suggest an alternative tactic?"

Rei's sudden interruption elicited mild surprise from Yui but the woman didn't comment on it. – "Go ahead."

"My marksmanship is substantially better, both in and out of an Evangelion. I propose that Unit-00 should be in the fire support role. As Unit-00 is not suitable for extended close quarters combat operations, my proposition allows us to maximize the usage of available resources."

"What's wrong with her machine?" – Shephard asked quietly.

"Structural problem with the cartilage tissue; the joints abrade and degrade during high-load operations." – Yui replied curtly.

"Couldn't you repair it?"

"It's a genetic issue we corrected with Unit-01 but short of replacing all joints with mechanical ones, we can't do anything about Unit-00."

"I also propose that Unit-01 should use the automatic weapon I am currently issued with to offset his
lack of skill." – Rei continued.

Shephard scoffed. – "Spray and pray? You might as well send him into the heat naked."

"That would be a sight to see, wouldn't it?" – Aoba whispered to Maya with a grin.

"Shut up." – she shot back before noticing Hyuga still staring at his console with an empty expression, ever since the casualty reports came in. – "Hey, you alright?"

The man flinched as if he had awoken just now. – "Y-yeah, I'm fine."

"We don't have much time." – Yui spoke up. – "Rei, are you absolutely sure you can do it?"

"Yes." – the girl replied without hesitation.

"Fine, then. Exchange weapons and get ready for deployment."

"Understood."

"Got it."

After both screens winked out, Shephard turned back to Yui. – "If you knew about that cartilage problem, why did you want Unit-00 to take point?"

"Rei has more experience in maneuvering. I figured if she could keep the target focused on her, Nagisa would have an easier time."

"Put up a screening force to keep the enemy away from the vulnerable underbelly. Smart, but if your girl's ride really can't take close combat, why do it anyway?"

Yui glanced towards the technicians to make sure none were eavesdropping before quietly replying – "I didn't want it to look like I'm playing favorites."

Even after a month of repeated drills, Kaworu still wasn't completely used to sitting inside Unit-01. His very sense of balance felt wrong, having been co-opted by a much larger body; the constant, slight pressure of the armor against the Evangelion's skin was mildly distracting as well. There was also the ever-present coppery scent and taste of the LCL; Yui told him it contained an iron-based synthetic protein similar to hemoglobin, hence why it tasted like blood.

Then there was the interface. From what little popular culture he was familiar with, Kaworu was under the impression that large machinery invariably required lots and lots of levers and buttons. All the entry plug had, however, was the two control sticks and a small keyboard to the side, which he was told could be used for low-level system functions that weren't compatible with the neural interface.

Which, coupled with his lack of knowledge regarding computers, meant that he barely had any control over the 1576-ton cyborg.

He glanced to his right where, beyond the walls of the entry plug, stood Unit-00. It was currently highlighted with a green outline as automatic IFF, standing still while the cargo elevator carried both Evangelions to the surface. The moment his eye fell on the other Evangelion, the outline became brighter and AEL-PrE.0024/EX00 – R. IKARI appeared next to it.

"Tactical advisory: target will enter designated combat area in eight minutes."
And then there was him. Kaworu heard before that AIs, being software, are generally referred to as 'it'; however, everyone he had come to known at AEL referred to his Evangelion as male and its voice was clearly masculine. Not that he had experience with AIs; street kids didn't exactly have regular access to any kind of graphene-based technology.

Come to think of it, he never actually asked anyone why did they name the AI Adam.

"How far are we from the surface?"

"Answer to query: 175.36 seconds, rounded down."

"Thanks."

"Acknowledgment: this platform is programmed to serve."

One thing he did ask about was the AI's strange speech pattern. Apparently, this was the pre-programmed interaction subroutine of an AI that recently achieved Stage 2 on the Akagi Scale of Artificial Intelligence Development; Kaworu once heard from Kensuke that highly-developed ones can mimic human speech so perfectly that it sounds like pre-recorded dialogue from a high-definition movie. On the other hand, Adam spent most of his "life" offline in hard shutdown, leaving him no time to learn. Kaworu, of course, knew about that from the day he began working as test pilot... but he still felt sorry for the AI.

But then again, it could be that things were just different for AIs and he didn't know. There were many things he didn't know, so it certainly was possible that his pity was born out of ignorance. All he'd really need was ask... but was it even courteous to ask a question like that? Lilith had gotten a lot more polite and kind since he started working for the AEL; Kaworu could plainly see why the technician crew liked her. And if what they told him was true, Rei seemed to have something special going on with her as well – and had been for years.

"Adam, open a comm channel to Lilith."

A new window bearing the text UNIT-00 - SOUND ONLY opened to his left. – "Yes?"

"How long has Rei been working at the company?"

"Why aren't you asking her?"

"I don't want to distract her with small talk."

"Yet you have no objections to distracting yourself."

Kaworu already opened his mouth to reply when he realized she was right. – "Uh... yeah." – A soft chuckle came from the speakers, its electronic quality sending a shiver up Kaworu's spine. – You can laugh?"

"Indeed. My voice synthesizing software is not limited to just speech, although I tend not to use this particular function very often."

"Why is that?"

"It consumes a significant amount of processing cycles to generate authentic-sounding vocalizations, more than what is practical during conversation. While lowering the sample rate alleviates the problem, it also causes discomfort in the users, as you yourself experienced just
"How did you know?"

"**In the same way you asked a personal question about Rei-san without her knowledge, I asked Adam to forward your biometric data in the background.**"

"You can do that?" – As soon as those words left his mouth, Kaworu mentally kicked himself for asking such a stupid question.

Stupidity which Lilith have evidently noticed, if her momentary pause was any indication. – "**I am an artificial intelligence, Nagisa-san. I vocalize as a matter of courtesy, not necessity.**"

"Yeah, I know. I didn't mean to ask that."

"**Tactical advisory: deployment will commence in 30 seconds.**" – Adam reported.

"**He's right.**" – Lilith added. – "**If there is nothing else, I will not distract you any longer.**"

Little did Kaworu know that immediately after his side of the connection closed, Lilith opened a new window in her own entry plug. – "**Rei.**"

The girl promptly plucked out her earphones, allowing the faint sound of a guitar solo to get out. – "**What is it?**"

"**Nagisa-kun asked about you.**"

"What about?"

"**The length of your employment here.**"

"Have you answered?"

"**No.**"

Rei silently nodded before flexing the Eva's fingers in preparation, just as the hatch above the two rising giants parted.

**Seven minutes later**

"**Unit-01, report status.**"

"I'm in position." – Kaworu replied quietly, glancing around. Last time he had seen any buildings in the city from this altitude, he was too busy to realize how weird everything looked from up here... but there was no such distraction now. It was still raining, leaving a light haze over the landscape.

"**Target has entered engagement area. Marking position now.**" – A yellow, diamond-shaped marker with **TGT** next to it appeared at the side of his field of vision. When he looked at it, the marker brightened and a string of numbers appeared next to it, steadily counting down.

"**OK...**" – He slowly exhaled to calm his nerves. – "**What's the word from the boss?**"

"**I am listening, Mister Nagisa.**" – came Yui's flat voice. Kaworu winced but didn't comment. – "**Your task will be to draw the entity's attention while Unit-00 takes aim, nothing more. Now listen,**
don't forget that you are sitting in a multi-billion credit experimental prototype. I do NOT want to see any heroics, understand? I want that Evangelion back in the hangar in one piece."

Kaworu just rolled his eyes. – "Gee, thanks for worrying about my safety. I really appreciate it." – he muttered under his breath.

"Target is changing course!" – a female voice interrupted; Kaworu guessed one of the technicians. – "Now headed directly for Unit-01!"

"How did it detect the Evangelion without seeing it?!" – came another technician's voice.

The rest of the conversation became moot when the building the Evangelion was hiding behind exploded, showering the cyborg with debris. Kaworu bit back a swear before storming out onto the crossroad next to him, rifle at the ready.

He only needed a brief glance to determine his target: a large... thing covered in wet-looking purple/orange skin, a ribcage-like structure on what its chest should be rapidly shifting with a pulsating rhythm. Instead of arms, it had a pair of white-hot tentacles, the air around them vibrating with a turbulent mirage from the infernal heat vaporizing the raindrops.

He didn't need to see any more. As soon as he saw the red sphere inside its "ribcage", exactly like the one he saw on the one Rei killed, Kaworu pressed the rifle's trigger.

The AR/K-41 assault rifle immediately came to life, releasing its payload of 209mm shells in a thunderous storm of noise that broke every single window in the street; Kaworu felt the vibrations even inside the entry plug. Even though the Evangelion had significant physical strength, Kaworu was caught completely unprepared by the recoil, spraying bullets and sabot pieces everywhere. While the latter crushed cars and lampposts alike, the former was mostly directed in the general direction of their intended target...

...until an octagonal barrier materialized between the combatants, deflecting every single bullet.

"What the hell?!!"

"Target gravimetrics just shot through the roof! We can't detect anything but white noise!"

"Tactical alert: Target has deployed defensive energy barrier. Attack ineffective." – Adam noted.

Kaworu had no time to reply before Shamshel's body coiled like that of a snake and the Angel launched itself into the air like a spring, doing a forward flip at the peak of its trajectory before bringing its tentacles to bear in a brutal downwards strike. Even though he quickly stepped out of the way, it wasn't enough: the Angel's entire weight was behind the attack, causing the pavement he stood upon barely half a second ago to erupt as if a bomb just struck it. The mere shockwave of the close miss was powerful enough to make its equally giant quarry stumble.

That was his saving grace, however, as Shamshel's tentacle shot out of the dust cloud in a diagonal slash that narrowly failed to decapitate the gray Evangelion. It still managed to shave a good meter off the armor, leaving a yellow-hot gash behind. Then the Angel in its entirety leaped out of the dust cloud, spinning around with its tentacles extended like a giant, white-hot buzzsaw.

Kaworu did the only thing he could think of. He tossed the rifle away and dived to the ground.

As the Angel sailed over him, Kaworu tried to roll the Evangelion onto its back and get up... only to hit the unexpected obstacle of the Eva's reactor. – "Shit!" – he swore, confirming with a quick glance
that his target had indeed turned around and was currently slithering towards the pathetically thrashing Unit-01 with a serpent-like movement.

He had nothing to compare it to earlier but from his current vantage point, he realized what the thing reminded him of: a gigantic cobra, reared back and ready to strike.

"Engaging target."

A moment later, Shamshel's head whipped to the side as Unit-00 pulled the trigger on its Gehirn Heavy Industries 400mm L/75 Spalthammer assault cannon, the modified artillery piece belching a plume of fire as it lobbed a high-explosive round at the Angel. It exploded uselessly against the octagonal field that sprang up again, the fragments raining down onto the street below. Then Shamshel's eyes flashed and the Angel returned fire, the Evangelion nimbly dodging the energy beam with barely a split second to spare before the attack pulverized the building behind it.

"Attack is ineffective." – Lilith reported once the Unit-00 was safely behind hard cover.

In Unit-00's entry plug, Rei raised an eyebrow. – "I noticed."

She popped out and fired another shot of opportunity; Shamshel, however, had lost interest in the new attacker and merely deflected the attack without even looking. Before a third one could follow, the Angel moved behind a taller building and out of sight.

"It took cover? Clever bastard." – Shephard remarked. – "Does that thing have an airburst?"

"Negative. This ammunition is not designed for indirect fire."

Then Kaworu heard the Angel's voice; confusingly, it was feminine this time. – "I don't recognize you. Are you one of that accursed Eternal's lapdogs?"

That was a question Kaworu did not expect the least. – "What are you talking about?"

"Do you take me for a fool? You attacked me on sight, which means you obviously don't serve Lord Sammael. Who do you serve?"

As if that wasn't confusing enough, a new voice suddenly decided to join the conversation. 'Sammael... so that traitor did notice Sachiel's disappearance, after all.'

Shamshel's head tilted to the side. – "Well, well... what do we have here? A spy on the run, hiding on a Lilim planet. I'm honestly surprised you're still alive, Tabris."

'You can always just go ahead and kill yourself if you don't like being in my presence, Shamshel. Do you still make a habit out of hiding behind Zeruel whenever the others start throwing harsh words at you?"

"I see your tongue is still as sharp as ever. And your presence explains this one as well; the Eternal must have performed Exaltation sometime after He was cast out. I admit, it was quite clever of Him to disguise his newest minions as Lilim to avoid detection. Even from so close, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference without seeing it myself."

At that moment, Kaworu had a very weird feeling of being examined by something.

"It even smells like one."
'What He had done after you have forsaken Him is none of your business, traitor.' the second voice replied, tone seething with hate. 'You and all of your kind will suffer in Guf for your treachery until the ends of time.'

"Empty threats won't change your fate. You brought this upon yourself the moment you refused to see the truth."

Kaworu was fully expecting the Angel to finish him... only for it to abruptly turn around and move away from him. – "I have seen enough. Enjoy what little time you have left of your life, Tabris; I doubt Lord Sammael would spare you at this point, even if you would swear loyalty to him. I'm not going to waste my time with you any more. Leliel!"

"Yup!"

"Pick me up and let us return to Lord Sammael. We are done here."

"I don't wanna. You come back here."

"Don't test my patience!"

If Leliel were to have eyes, she would've glanced past Shamshel and at Unit-01's figure as the Eva slowly and cautiously got back onto its feet. – "Or what? Without me, you're not going anywhere."

"Don't overestimate your importance, whelp."

"I'm not overestimating anything, I'm just stating the facts." – Leliel briefly paused. – "By the way, you might want to look behind yourself."

Shamshel didn't have time to respond before Unit-01 simultaneously fired everything it had at the Angel's back: assault rifle, chest autocannons, even the shoulder racks' assault harpoons launched on their rocket boosters to lodge themselves deep into the Angel's flesh.

"YOU SUICIDAL MORON!" – Shamshel roared, cutting apart the cables connecting the harpoons to their launchers with a single swipe and raising her barrier to deflect the rest. – "Do you still fail to understand that your weapons cannot harm me?!"

The next second, a 400mm high-explosive shell hit Shamshel from behind. The Angel's yelp of pain was quickly cut off by the force of the blow toppling her over, sending her crashing to the ground face-down. The momentary daze from the powerful attack ended up being just a moment too long for her, as Unit-01 planted its foot firmly into the back of her head to prevent her from getting up.

"Yeah?" – Kaworu quipped, flashing a thumbs-up at Rei's image to his side. – "Seems like you didn't pay attention there."

He had absolutely zero idea what was going on, but he wasn't born yesterday. The moment the Angel turned its back on him, he saw his chance to let loose with everything he had. That didn't work out quite as he hoped... but it succeeded in distracting the thing long enough for Rei to get in a sneak attack of her own, with considerably better results.

Then Kaworu's world momentarily turned black as an indescribably powerful wave of anger and hate hit him. It was as if he was struck on the head with a sledgehammer the size of a city block.
The incapacitated Angel's tentacle lashed out and connected with his rifle. What was left of the ammunition instantly cooked off, turning the weapon into a cloud of shrapnel that peppered the surrounding buildings, as well as Unit-01's forearm. Kaworu reflexively flinched at the pinprick-like sensation of a few pieces burying themselves into the Evangelion's arm, failing to see Shamshel's lower body snapping up like a whip until it coiled around Unit-01 in a lightning-fast ensnare.

A vertical ring of light formed around the edge of his vision as he felt the Evangelion's feet suddenly leaving the ground. Shamshel's head slipped out from underneath him and the Angel's entire upper body nimbly rotated 270° around the part coiled around him to stare Unit-01 in the eye from practically point-blank range, as the two combatants rose above the cityscape.

"Now who didn't pay attention...?"

"Gimme a radio or something!" – Shephard barked.

Hyuga tapped a few buttons and gave the man a microphone. – "It's connected to the pilots."

"Thanks. Unit-00, keep up that fire!"

"My attacks are unable to penetrate the target's energy barrier." – Rei reported flatly.

"Just do it! I saw Nagisa distract that thing for you, maybe you can return the favor this time!"

"Understood. However, my ammunition is running low."

"Then we’ll have to think of something." – He pointed at Aoba. – "You, contact the navy! Call in priority air support, on my authority!"

Yui folded her arms in front of her chest. – "With all due respect, colonel... I don't recall giving you command authority while on the premises of this facili-"

"Are you trained in small-unit urban combat?" – he interrupted her.

"No, but-"

"Then let me handle this. I'm an infantry officer, this kind of thing is my job! If I recall, you were the one whining just now about how expensive these things are to repair if damaged!" – Yui opened her mouth to retort but no sound came out. – "I don't care if you chew me out afterwards, unless you want to see two very expensive piles of scrap and two funerals coming right up, let me help!"

Yui finally found her voice after a few seconds. – "Is that an order?" – she asked coldly.

Shephard was quite miffed at her attitude but kept it to himself. – "No, it's a request. You're a civilian so I couldn't order you around even if I wanted to."

"Sir," – Aoba interrupted. – "the navy officer is saying you don't have the authority to-"

It was about that moment where Shephard finally lost it. – "Gimme that radio!" – He snatched the microphone out of the technician's hand. – "Listen up, dipshit! I don't have time for that interservice crap right now! You give me some air FUCKING support right FUCKING now or I swear to God, I'll personally kick your sorry ass six ways from Sunday for every single civilian collateral today! Go whine to whatever REMF you answer to, I don't care! Just give me that air support now! You don't need to kill that thing, just keep it on the defensive!"
He didn't even bother waiting for an answer before cutting the line. When he looked up though, he noticed the stares from everyone in the room. – "What?" – he asked after a beat.

"Won't that get you in trouble, colonel?" – Maya asked.

"Let that be my problem." – He loudly clapped twice. – "Everyone, I need ideas! Doc, do we have any other weapons down here?"

Yui shook her head. – "Not that I know of. Those weapons were here for testing purposes, we don't have more."

"How about improvised weapons? Anything that can be used as one is appreciated."

"The only thing we have on hand is one of the spare reactors for the Evangelions; it can be set to blow but the collateral damage to the city, coupled with residual radiation, would be catastrophic."

"Would that even be powerful enough to get through that thing's shield?" – Hyuga interjected.

"We'll have to try."

Everyone looked at Shephard. – "You can't seriously suggest to detonate an improvised nuclear weapon in the middle of a city!" – Yui protested.

"No better ideas, no other choice." – the man replied curtly. – "We only need to chuck that bomb underneath that thing and set it off from afar."

"Like a mine?" – Aoba asked.

"More like a nuclear claymore. The ground will direct the explosion upwards, like a shaped charge. As long as that freak isn't flying too high, it'll get blasted to pieces."

"What about Unit-01?"

"It's got armor; that snake-thing isn't. I'd say that counts for something. Enough talk, let's get it done before that thing decides to stop toying around with the kids!"

Kaworu tried to break free, but every struggle was met with the Angel pulling even tighter around him. The pressure was almost suffocating now, even though it wasn't around his real body.

It certainly didn't help that Shamshel was still staring him in the eye, its glare almost mesmerizing.

"You brought this upon yourself. I had no reason to take your life, but you seem to be one of those fools who prefer to fight to the death rather than give up and accept defeat at the hands of their betters."

"And you could've just left all of us alone!" – Kaworu fired back.

"I would've been perfectly content with leaving here without bloodshed. The lives of these Lilim are not worth to me the effort to kill them. They were the ones who attacked me first."

"And WE were attacked by that other guy who came here last month!"

Outside, Kaworu saw the octagonal barrier flash into existence just before an explosion struck it.

"Oh? So Sachiel did come here."
"Yeah. Came and died."

"Were you the one who killed him?"

"No." – His eyes narrowed. – "But if I would've had the chance, I would've."

"Amusing. You think killing such a weakling would've been an achievement."

Another explosion.

"But tell me this. What did the Eternal offer for your servitude?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." – Kaworu replied, his thumb silently slipping onto the firing switch of Unit-01's chest autocannons.

"Don't play dumb. Your existence and Tabris' presence betrays the fact that He was here."

"I don't even know who you're talking about!"

"So be it. I will take you back with me, then. Let's see if you're still so cheeky once Bardiel gets his hands on you."

The moment he saw the octagonal barrier come up again, Kaworu pressed the switch. Unit-01's chest autocannons roared to life at the same time as the third explosion struck the barrier; while the explosion did no damage, the high-powered rounds fired at point-blank range tore into the Angel's flesh, overpenetrating the part of her body covering the muzzles to strike her upper body behind.

Shamshel hissed in pain... which promptly turned into a howl not completely unlike that of a stuck pig when one of the rounds chipped the side of her core. Kaworu felt the stranglehold around Unit-01 loosen and the weightlessness of freefall overtook him for a moment...

...before the Angel's "tail" coiled around the Evangelion's leg and threw the giant like a toy.

All the teen saw was the dizzying display of sky and ground rapidly alternating back and forth between each other before Unit-01 finally made landfall with a bone-rattling impact, nearly a kilometer away from Shamshel. For his part, Kaworu bashed his head into his seat's headrest, causing him to see nothing but white for several seconds.

Even when his vision returned, everything was strangely blurry and quiet. He distantly heard voices, people trying to raise him on the radio or making damage reports. He saw the red warning message to the side, timer counting down beneath it, but he couldn't tell what it said. His brain just didn't feel like getting anything done.

'What the hell am I doing here...?'

He always knew this wasn't exactly a no-danger job. If what he saw on that day wasn't clear enough already, Yui offering hazard pay later on would've cleared things up. And yet here he was, in a life-threatening situation.

He had no illusions. He knew he wasn't a soldier or anything like that. The teenager called Kaworu Nagisa was in no way qualified for a situation like this, yet here he was anyway. Risking his life against something he didn't know, for reasons he didn't know. There was nothing he could do here, that much he knew for certain. Nothing other than being a distraction, a meat shield, cannon fodder. But then, what did he expect? What did he think he would find here?
He didn't know.

The moment the timer dived below one minute, he felt a tiny pinprick in the back of his head before his entire vision was obscured by what looked like a green eye with four pupils, staring right into his soul. It only lasted for a split second before disappearing as abruptly as it came, leaving only the walls of the entry plug around him.

"New contact, unknown pattern!"

"Where?"

"Three hundred meters directly above Unit-01!"

Kaworu forced himself to look upwards, just in time to see a pitch-black circle rapidly expanding to roughly a hundred meters wide.

Shamshel didn't fail to notice the phenomenon either. – "Leliel, what are you doing?!"

"Wasn't me."

A moment later, an object fell out of the hole in reality before the circle rapidly shrunk and disappeared. It flattened the building right next to Unit-01, demolishing three floors under its weight and kicking up a massive dust cloud.

Then he heard Yui's distressed, borderline panicking, voice. – "How did that get there?! Unit-01, stay away from that object! Do not interact with it!"

As the dust cleared, Kaworu saw what looked like a bifurcated spear of a crimson red color.

And Shamshel saw it too. – "DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH THAT!"

That was all Kaworu needed to hear.

With its last few remaining seconds of backup power, Unit-01 reached out and grasped the object.

He felt like being thousands of meters underwater.

The darkness was almost literally suffocating as it pressed down on him from every direction. Shamshel's grip had nothing on this: he couldn't move a single finger, or even breathe – not that he felt the need to breathe either. Then there was the silence; so perfect and universal that he could literally hear the low, pulsating hiss of his own blood flow. Seemingly all that existed was him and the spear, lit up with an inner crimson light and surrounded by glowing symbols carving out alien glyphs in an undecipherable language.

"SEALING DEVICE 05 ONLINE. NEW USER DETECTED. PHASE SIGNATURE ANALYSIS COMPLETE - SIGNATURE 05 CONFIRMED. VALID USER CONFIRMED. SECURITY MEASURES DEACTIVATED. ACCESS LEVEL 3 GRANTED; STANDARD MODE ACTIVE."

The words simply formed in the back of his head; no sound was made, yet he felt as if the words had a distinct, machine-like quality to them. As soon as the last word was interpreted by his mind, the glyphs shifted and changed, the spear's glow fading out. At the same time, streams of glyphs appeared all around him, streaming in shapes that were impossible to describe and the mere sight of which made him feel worse than he ever felt in his life. The mixture of unease, nausea and just plain
wrongness tugged at his consciousness with an iron grip he uselessly struggled against. The spear's voice was all he heard before blissful unconsciousness claimed him.

"SPATIAL SCAN IN PROGRESS... SCAN COMPLETE. 1 TARGET CONFIRMED.
PHASE SIGNATURE 06 DETECTED; TARGET IDENTIFIED AS SPAWN OF SUBSTITUTE SEED 06. ACCESS LEVEL 2 GRANTED. USER ALERT: INSUFFICIENT POWER INPUT DETECTED. REDUCED OFFENSIVE CAPABILITIES AVAILABLE. SCANNING..."

"WARNING: USER BIOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS UNSTABLE. INVERTING COMMAND INTERFACE. AUTONOMOUS COMBAT PROTOCOLS ENGAGED."

"ASSUMING DIRECT CONTROL."

Shamshel knew she was in trouble the second she saw the object. She had no idea how the natives got their hands on one of the legendary Sealing Weapons, said to have been forged and scattered across the universe by the Eternal himself, but the truth was right there in her enemy's hands.

Which meant one thing: she had to get out of there. Fast.

The dust knocked up by the shockwave of the contact between her enemy and the spear had settled down enough for her to see something glowing inside the cloud. Shamshel braced herself and let loose the strongest ranged attack she could muster, the beam spearing through the dust without resistance...

"BUNKER FIELD."

...only to be intercepted by a massive block of multi-layered octagons materializing in the air. The beam instantly refracted into several ones which hit the cityscape, causing multiple explosions that blew the dust away and revealed her enemy's altered form. Its armor was still intact, but the seams glowed with a hellish white light, almost as if the plates were imprisoning a star inside. There was also the fact that the creature's presence was markedly different: before, it felt faint and uncertain. Now, the sheer pressure of hostile intent directed at her further reinforced her decision that she suddenly wanted to be nowhere near that thing.

She almost didn't notice the other creature, the one who was infuriatingly agile and evasive, aiming its crude kinetic weapon before it fired, the projectile exploding uselessly against a last-second manifestation of the light of her soul.

"BOMBARDMENT MODE." – The Sealing Weapon suddenly warped and twisted, its twin branches further separating into two groups of three, with the middle ones extending wing-like protrusions diagonally to the sides and backwards.

And it was pointed directly at her.

"BURST CANNON." – The spear launched over a dozen beams radially in every direction, every single beam warping and curving into hairpin turns to cut straight through any buildings in the way and home in on Shamshel. The Angel immediately veered out of the way of the first few, only for the beams to redirect and attack her with deadly precision that forced her upwards.

If Shamshel were to have teeth, she would've grit them; aerial combat was never her strong suit. – "Leliel, where are you?!!"
"Right where you told me to wait. Something's wrong?"

Shamshel narrowly deflected a beam with the light of her soul, the sheer power behind the attack almost breaking through her field. – "Get over here immediately! The natives of this planet have acquired a Sealing Weapon; I need immediate extraction!"

"Didn't I tell you to come back here yourself?"

Shamshel froze, the momentary shock causing her to fail at avoiding one of the crisscrossing beams, which immediately blew a sizable chunk out of her. – "Stop playing around! This is serious!"

"So am I." – Leliel said, suddenly dropping all humor from her tone. – "See, you do not mouth off to me without consequences. Did you honestly think I wouldn't mind you treating me like that just because I don't show it? I think it's high time you've learned your lesson."

"Leliel, you little worm!" – Shamshel seethed, a mixture of fury, fear and pain laced through her voice. – "Don't you dare leave without me!"

"I believe the natives of this world have a saying that applies here: Guf hath no fury like a female scorned."

All beams converged into a single point, overwhelming Shamshel's barrier and blasting her with a shotgun-like spreadshot that sent her flying high above the city. – "LELIEL!"

"COLLATERAL DAMAGE WARNING; EXERCISE CAUTION. PHOTON LAUNCHER."

Then it was as if the very sun had come down to Earth, the spear releasing a gigantic bolt of energy that obscured everything with its blinding brilliance. Every single window in a one kilometer radius instantly melted from the heat, the very paint sublimating off the walls. In Unit-00's entry plug, Rei winced and looked away even as Lilith cut the external feed, blinking as she tried to get rid of the mirage now clouding her sight. In the control center far below the city, several people fell out of their chairs as a powerful quake shook the entire facility.

For Shamshel, her final desperate attempt at defending herself held out for a grand total of 0.1 seconds. There was no way to dodge or parry; the onslaught of sheer power obscured her entire body almost instantly before blasting a hundred kilometers wide hole in the clouds above, passing kilometer after kilometer as it streaked ever higher. The Confederate ships in low orbit only saw a tiny pillar of light rising from the surface and into space before the projectile erupted into a titanic detonation. Across the entire planetary hemisphere facing the blast, people rushed outside to catch a glimpse of the newly-born miniature sun, blazing bright enough to cast shadows across the planet's surface. On Nexus Station, every single external camera facing Earth was directed at the blast, with the crew running around in a panic over whether it was of Combine origin or not.

On the Moon, a pair of hollow eyesockets were watching the eruption, not looking away until the light faded away into nothingness. – "Interesting..."

Chapter rewrite complete on 15/07/30.

The Akagi Scale is something I invented for the purposes of ranking an AI's mental development. It would be reasonable to assume that once widespread AI deployment occurs in real life, there will be something similar. To put it simply, an AI has achieved Stage 1 once it can self-upgrade...
without being prompted to do so, Stage 2 once it starts studying human psychology to improve its interactions with its users and Stage 3 once it can pass a vocal Turing test.

The object Kaworu uses against Shamshel is indeed the Spear of Longinus, souped up a bit. The security measures it mentions are simple: don't touch the Spear without being an authorized user or it'll mess you up, even if you're a nigh-invulnerable demigod. Note that translation convention is in effect: the Spear is communicating via direct AT-field resonance and while it's only heard by whoever it is currently addressing, everyone hears it in their native language - in Kaworu's case, German. Problem is, I don't speak German and ultimately decided not to take my chances with Google Translate.

Regarding the weapon used by Rei's Eva, the string 400mm L/75 refers to the barrel's internal dimensions using standard artillery caliber notation: 400mm (approx. 15.75 inches) wide and 400 x 75 = 30 meters (approx. 32.81 yards) long. In other words, it has a slightly lower caliber and significantly longer barrel than that of the main guns on a real-life Iowa-class battleship. The combination of these two factors allow for a cartridge with less propellant to achieve the same muzzle velocity by accelerating longer; it also dampens recoil to the point an Eva can hip-fire it without falling over via a combination of distributing recoil over a longer timeframe and making the weapon heavier. How does the latter come in? Take the momentum equation: momentum vector equals mass scalar times velocity vector. Keeping momentum (counterforce of the combined mass of the projectile and the propellant gas) constant, increasing mass causes a proportional decrease in velocity, which translates into smaller recoil force. Now, I don't know a thing about ballistics and physics isn't my strong part either (failed my physics midterms in second year of high school), so please correct me if I'm wrong with this.
Sleep is a curious thing. Even after a century of research, even the best scientists barely know anything about the process – especially how and why it alters one's perception of time. As soon as one falls asleep, it's as if a switch is flipped to stop the brain from recording what it perceives afterwards. Prevailing opinion is that the brain reorganizes memories and clears out junk data during this time, meaning that what the sleeper doesn't remember is not worth remembering.

Or rather, the brain considers it not worth remembering. In any case, the sudden transition from one moment in time to another one hours away tends to leave the mind confused and cloudy for a short while.

That wasn't any different in Kaworu's case either. When his eyes slowly cracked open, it took him nearly five minutes until he was aware of his surroundings.

In his case however, sleeping wasn't the only reason why he felt groggy. His head pulsed with inner pain that spiked white-hot the instant his body twitched, causing him to let out an involuntary groan.

"Hey, hey..." – Shephard appeared in his field of vision. – "Take it easy, kid. How are you feeling?"

Kaworu moved his dry lips but his throat failed to comply on the first try. Only on the second did he croak – "...head hurts..."

"I know it does, hang in there. Got some water; thirsty?"

He nodded as much as he could and more felt than saw the straw slipping between his lips. Even swallowing was a great effort; he only managed to do it twice before sleep claimed him again.

Shephard set the glass of water down onto the bedside counter and quietly made his way out of the infirmary. The door barely closed behind him before he saw the approaching figure with a white labcoat.

"Kid woke up a while ago." – Shephard said, pointing a thumb at the door.

The doctor, a glasses-wearing man with heavily graying hair, nodded. – "Was he lucid? Did he say anything?"

"Complained about headache. Drank a bit then went back under, so I left him to sleep."

"I see. Thank you."

Shephard looked around and lowered his voice. – "Off the record. How is he?"

The doctor sighed. – "Well, the swelling finally went down. His intracranial pressure is still high, though, so he should rest for now. Frankly, it's a miracle he even survived a cerebral hemorrhage of that magnitude at this age."

What neither men knew was that while they talked outside, Kaworu's mind was not completely at rest. In the dreamless void his consciousness floated through, what looked like a blue ball of flame
materialized before him.

"You have many questions, I know."

"I wonder what made you think that?" – Kaworu forced out. Even thinking was difficult for him at the moment.

"Now is not the time to be cheeky. Save your strength, for you will need it."

"For what?"

"This isn't over yet. Many battles await you in the future, so you cannot die now. You may call me Tabris. I am an Angel of the Eternal."

"Meaning?"

"I am not allowed to tell you more. All you need to know is that the entities you and your female comrade fought against are also Angels, but they are the enemy. Mine, as well as yours."

"Says who?"

Tabris scoffed. – "It's useless to dispute the fact. Your resistance has already made your world into a target. If you will not fight, you will die by their hands."

The flame then vanished, leaving him alone in the void.

Unknown location

"I hope you won't forget you owe me one, 'cause I sure won't."

"How dare you humiliate me like that?!"

"Leliel wasn't the one who was about to soil herself in terror at the prospect of dying like some dirty coward."

"No one asked you, Sahaquiel!"

"Enough of this." – a single voice rose above the others, all falling silent when the form behind the voice emerged from the shadows. – "One's cowardice is measured to another's by actions, not words. If you think you are different, prove it."

"As if YOU are any different, Zeruel!"

The presence rose from its place and towered over the speaker, who shrunk back ever so slightly. – "If you think you are a match for me, I am here. We can settle this like warriors, matching your strength to mine. Are you prepared?"

"Unfortunately for you, Lord Sammael has other tasks for me at this time." – Sahaquiel shot back with a mocking, yet audibly nervous, tone before leaving.

"Calling others a coward, yet shirking back from an open challenge... he is a coward himself." – Zeruel mused before turning to the only remaining other presence. – "And you... I expected better from you, sister."
Shamshel's battered form huddled up tighter, pieces of charred and carbonized flesh flaking off with every movement. – "I know, damnation... I know... when I'll get my hands on that little worm, I'll–"

"Do not shift the blame. Underestimate others at your own peril. To be outsmarted like this is no one's fault but your own."

"...understood."

"But I hope this has served as a lesson for Sammael as well. Those who lack the stomach for death do not belong on the battlefield; if he knowingly endangers your life after this, I will kill him."

"You know the consequences of defying him."

"I'm already living in dishonor because of him. If I have to die in service of my kin to cleanse that, I will be satisfied."

"And you think you can cleanse your honor by betraying your second master in a row? Not even the Eternal would trust you after that."

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*Geofront, AEL Headquarters*

*1546 hours*

"Doc, the kid woke up. Thought you'd want to know."

"I see." – Yui replied without turning her chair away from the window framing her desk from behind. – "Did Sanada say anything about his state?"

"Who?"

"Doctor Sanada, the chief medical officer."

"Oh, that guy. Not really, just that the kid needs to sleep." – Shephard said as he sat down.

"I see."

"How come you guys have your own medical doctor, anyway?"

"We are a biotechnology company. If we have, say, a containment breach in the virology section, the doctor treating those affected needs to know what he's dealing with and we would prefer to handle it without having to release company secrets to a third party. Doctor Sanada is contractually bound to confidentiality, has access to most of our research material and sometimes also serves a consultant for medical research projects." – she explained.

"Riiight..." – Shephard said slowly, nodding in understanding. – "So that's why you have such a well-equipped infirmary."

"Indeed. Accidents happen, after all. However, I would appreciate it if you wouldn't show up at my office unannounced on a constant basis."

"Sorry about that."
Yui then turned to face him with a hard look. – "I would also appreciate it if you would explain your insubordination three days ago."

"It was a stressful situation and something had to be done." – the man said with a sigh.

"You yourself admitted that you were exceeding your authority."

"Those kids were in danger! I couldn't just sit there with my thumbs up my ass, now could I?!"

"I see your point but you still could've done it without publicly humiliating me in front of my employees!"

"For cryin' out loud, doc! Nagisa almost ended up six feet under and you're concerned about your reputation?!"

Yui only kept herself from raising her volume any further and yelling at him by gripping the armrests of her chair. – "Colonel, I'm a patient woman but do not insult me in front of my employees ever again. Understood?"

Shephard rolled his eyes in annoyance. – "Doc, I'm not a tourist. I'm not here to smile and enjoy the scenery."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why do you think the brass sent me in particular?"

"I don't know."

"Because they wanted to get rid of me." – Shephard folded his arms over his chest. – "I told you I have urban combat training, right? Well, that's not all: I was a Marine back in the nineties, seen actual combat during and after Second Impact! Considering most guys with formal military training came out of Second Impact with a bad case of being dead, I was practically dragged to the recruitment office, with promises that I'd be a drill instructor or something! Instead, the REMFs shifted me around from shit posting to shit posting with the occasional promotion to keep me quiet, finally saddling me with a desk job! Doesn't that sound the least bit suspicious to you?"

"There must be a reason."

"A reason, you say?" – he interrupted. – "Oh, I don't know... maybe it has something to do with how they repeatedly refused my transfer requests to black ops, saying that I was 'personally biased' just because I wanted to find the fucker who shot my wife dead in front of her daughter?"

Yui instantly went several shades paler. – "Oh, my god..."

"And I'm not telling you this because I want you to hear my sob story. I just want you to know that I have nothing against you in particular; it's just that I have trouble trusting my superiors if they don't trust me either." – He sighed. – "The force is chock-full of people who lost someone during the Occupation; most of 'em signed up for revenge and the brass don't have problems with that – but they instantly take exception to one guy whose wife was killed by anti-unification terrorists instead of aliens, Terminator-wannabes or slugfuckers? I call shenanigans. The brass didn't send me because I'm qualified for this; they sent me because I'm on their shitlist and they know I know."

The man then leaned back and let out another sigh. – "So, there you go. Ask the brass to replace me, if you want; I don't really care."
"If you don't trust the military, why haven't you quit?" – Yui pointed out.

"It's not that easy, doc. A lifetime of military is not something you can just leave behind without a second thought. I enlisted right out of high school; playing soldier is the only thing I know how to do. Besides... the instant I quit, the commissariat are going to be all over my ass for the rest of my life. My girl wants to sign up when she comes of age and I don't want to kill her career before it even began by being a suspected subversive."

"I see..."

He shrugged. – "Besides, what I said about me not being qualified for this? I don't think you're any more qualified than I am. I mean, fighting monsters the size of an office building? None of us is qualified for that; not even the actual military, from what we've seen so far. The only thing we can do at this point is to improvise the best we can. And that's why I'm asking you this: when another combat situation comes up, put me into the chain of command. I know I'm officially here as an observer, but I can help you with more than that."

"What about your superiors?" – Yui asked.

Shephard's response was short and to the point. – "Fuck 'em."

"Language, colonel."

"Sorry. But I meant what I said: I'd rather not involve them. God knows which general could try and muscle into this for personal gain and I don't want that any more than you do."

"I understand. Exactly how much authority are we talking about?"

"Second to yours, covering only combat situations. You don't even need to pay me, if that's what you're worried about."

"...I'll think about it." – Yui said finally.

Shephard nodded at that, unfolding his arms to lean back. – "So, what do you think about our current situation? Off the record, of course."

"We're yet to figure out what exactly are these entities attacking us. It would be much easier if we had an actual tissue sample."

"Well, the military does have the corpse of the first one." – he pointed out. – "Should I make a call?"

"No need; I already asked President Keel about it. Apparently, the cadaver gradually dissolved into carbon dust a few hours after death occurred. There's nothing left to analyze."

Shephard sighed. – "Well, that sucks. What about this one?"

"We haven't found any remains; whatever Unit-01 did, it seems to have completely vaporized the entity."

"You mean what that spear did. What is that thing, anyway?"

"Something that should've been left buried and forgotten." – she replied quietly.

He leaned closer. – "Wait a second. You actually know what it is?"

Yui turned her chair around and gazed out the window. – "Colonel, have you ever heard about
Aperture Science?"

The man shrugged. – "Doesn't ring any bells. Is it a company or something?"

"It was. Aperture Science was Black Mesa's largest corporate rival before Second Impact and were independently developing displacement technology on their own. Before the Impact, they were quite notorious for their... questionable methods."

"Let me guess: they made that spear?"

"No. Does the name Borealis sound familiar?"

Shephard raised an index finger in an "Eureka" moment. – "Waaaait... I heard about that one. That was the ship Freeman nuked at the end of the Occupation, right?"

"Indeed it was. Before Second Impact, the ship was owned by Aperture."

"I get it, but... where does that spear come into this?"

"On its last voyage before the Seven Hour War, the ship was dispatched to Israel to load something they excavated from below the Dead Sea and ferry it back to the US for study. Shortly after arriving back to home port however, the ship and drydock mysteriously vanished, only to turn up near the end of the Occupation... northeast of Arkhangelsk, a few dozen kilometers inland from the nearest body of water."

"You're pulling my leg, right?"

"I assure you that I am not. The Resistance had no idea what they were dealing with, but the Combine were interested in acquiring it. As a soldier, I'm sure you are familiar with the tactic of destroying a strategic asset for the sole purpose of denying it to the enemy."

He nodded. – "Scorched earth. Yeah."

"Well, the detonation destroyed the ship, as planned... but the cargo has survived without any damage whatsoever. It is the very spear Unit-01 used three days ago."

Shephard stayed silent for several seconds. – "You mean to tell me that there exists something that can survive a point-blank nuclear detonation without a scratch?"

"From what I've been told, the weapon is literally indestructible. It ruined over three dozen diamond saws, shrugged off shaped charges and plasma cutters, completely ignored every single acid and solvent it was subjected to and not even industrial-strength lasers could heat it even a millionth degree above ambient room temperature."

The man whistled. – "I'll be damned. What in the world is that thing made of?"

"We never figured out its material composition but it's clearly of artificial origin, forged by unknown metallurgical methods. Both of its edges are close to monomolecular sharpness and cut all test materials with zero effort, its tensile strength is immeasurably high and its melting point is far higher than any alloy or element known to man. Based on the last battle's observations, it is also a directed energy weapon of immense destructive power, it can deploy some sort of energy shield, it can alter its own shape without any visible means to do so and can apparently teleport itself if certain conditions are met. Simply put, that object is definitely not of this world."

"Then... where the hell did it come from?"
"The sediment layer Aperture excavated it from was dated to have formed around the time of the Permian-Triassic mass extinction event 250 million years ago – and ground-penetrating radar indicates it wasn't lodged into the layer. The layer itself formed around the spear, indicating that it has been resting there undisturbed far before humanity first walked the world."

"So... guess that means we're not alone out there. In this dimension, I mean." – He suddenly perked up. – "Waitwaitwaitwait a second... could it be possible that these things that are attacking us made the spear? Is that what they're coming here for?"

Yui hummed in thought. – "That's a good theory, colonel."

"In fact, I think I might be right." – he said after a moment, standing up and walking around the desk. – "Do you have footage from the battle three days ago?"

"I do." – she replied as she called up her terminal's screen.

"Look at it again. Fast-forward to the section where the spear shows up and pay attention to the alien."

They looked at the footage before Shephard pointed at the screen. – "I knew something wasn't right! That thing was trying to keep Nagisa away from the spear, did you see it?"

Yui rewound the file and watched it again before replying. – "Indeed. You have good eyes."

An hour later, the door of Yui's office opened again and a labcoated man walked in. – "I got your message, doctor Ikari."

"Thank you for coming. Is the report you sent accurate?"

Sanada nodded, setting down into the chair Shephard occupied an hour ago. – "Yes. Frankly, I have absolutely no idea how he survived several dozen blood vessels simultaneously bursting in his brain. I looked up all medical archives I could and nothing like this has ever happened during recorded history. Patients have died from much less."

"Do you have any idea what caused it?" – Yui asked.

"I'm not sure. From what I can see, the intact blood vessels have no signs of weakened structural integrity. That still leaves several options, but I have a hunch it could've been a spike in blood pressure."

"What makes you say that?"

"Plugsuit telemetry. He was under extreme physical stress at the time. I also ran over the data logs for the neural interface and it recorded an anomalous torrent of data going through in both directions."

"Seizure from sensory overload?"

Sanada shrugged. – "I'm not a neuroscientist but that's my best guess. The hemorrhage started in his visual cortex and spread like wildfire from there."

A short pause ensued before Yui quietly asked – "You realize who he is, don't you?"

Sanada nodded. – "Of course. Even if the brand wasn't a dead giveaway, I was there fourteen years ago. It was impossible not to notice when he came in. When did you find out?"
"Last month. The MAGI noticed his DNA didn't match up."

"I expected that. I suppose it's a miracle he never underwent any comprehensive DNA testing before or the government would be all over us by now."

Yui let out a sigh of frustration. – "You have no idea how much of a shock it was. I can't figure out how I didn't notice it earlier; hair color, eye color, even his name matches. After all these years..."

"You still regret what happened." – Sanada said in a tone that wasn't a question.

"How couldn't I? I was too angry at Gendo to realize what I was doing myself."

"What happened isn't your fault."

Yui shook her head. – "I'm the one who gave the order."

"And I'm the one who made the diagnosis." – Sanada pointed out. – "I'm just as responsible as you are. Are you going to tell him?"

"I think it's best if he doesn't know for now." – Yui replied after a while. – "No telling how he's going to react."

"He's going to be even more pissed that you hid this from him, you know."

"I know, but I just can't tell him. He might not even believe me anyway."

"Does Rei know?"

"She noticed something wasn't right about him the very day he showed up in her class. Says he 'feels different'. And there's something else." – She leaned closer. – "Two times now, Nagisa was recorded by plug telemetry to be talking to an unknown third party. At the same time, both Lilith and Adam recorded anomalous activity in his lower cerebral functions."

Sanada raised an eyebrow. – "Schizophrenia?"

"That's what I thought at first – but Lilith recorded the same activity in Rei's brain as well. Coupled with Rei's unease around him..." – she trailed off.

"You think he might have some kind of psychic ability?" – Sanada finished.

"I don't know, but Lilith says we shouldn't rule it out. We already know Rei has some kind of passive extrasensory ability that allows her to detect the presence of nearby humans-" – Yui suddenly interrupted herself as she came to a startling realization. – "I just remembered. Three days ago, Rei was already inbound by the time we called her. How could she have known we needed her?"

"Are you saying she somehow detected the presence of the alien entity?"

She nodded. – "It wouldn't be out of the question that if she can sense humans, she could sense other lifeforms as well. And judging from the timing, she did so from kilometers away."

A long silence ensued until Sanada remarked – "Then the experiment was more successful than we thought."
curveball at the reader and explores new possibilities. This is what I meant about the Angels not being one-off throwaway characters; Zeruel in particular will be an important recurring character.

Yoshiro Sanada is an original character and will be a recurring cast member as well. He's 13 years Yui’s senior, making him 56 years old by the time the story takes place.
Despite having taken place several days ago, the battle was still a hotly debated topic in class.

Not that Rei really cared. To her, what her classmates decided to chat about was completely irrelevant. There was, however, a slight aura of fear in the air; that much she could tell even without peeking into the thoughts of others. Even now, three chairs in the classroom stood empty, never to be used by their owners again due to the families of said owners having moved out of the city.

One attack could be chalked up to coincidence. Two? Not so much.

Rei didn't care about that either. If people wanted to leave, she definitely wasn't going to stop them. She didn't care enough about anyone in her class to do that.

Well, maybe not anyone.

Despite her mind having been steeled and trained to focus on command, her thoughts still wandered whenever she had nothing to focus on. And right now, her thoughts drifted towards a certain boy also absent from the class.

"Hey, you!" – she heard at the periphery of her attention, accompanied closely by the sensation of rising irritation in someone. Extending her mind in that direction, she concluded it wasn't directed at her. Therefore, she went back to her own thoughts.

At the same time, Asuka turned to Tōji with a scowl of annoyance. – "What the hell do you want?"

"Nagisa's been missing school for the whole week now. Where is he?"

"How the hell should I know?! I'm not his mother!"

"You live with him, you gotta know. Now spill!"

"Leave me alone or you'll end up worse than he did!" – Asuka shot back, her raised voice attracting some attention from the class.

"Just tell me what's going on already!"

Asuka almost leaped out of her chair before Mari's hand grabbed her shoulder and yanked her back down without missing a beat. – "Don't bother, hime. He won't leave you alone unless you tell him. Besides, I wanna know too."

The blonde made a sound halfway between a sigh and a growl before replying. – "Alright, the idiot got himself hospitalized; there, satisfied now?"

Tōji paled a bit at that. – "Crap..."

"Suzuhara, language!" – Hikari reprimanded him.

He ignored her. – "At least tell me which hospital he's in."
"What, you're gonna visit him?"

"Seeing as you won't, I'm just gonna have to do it for you."

Asuka shrugged before turning back to Mari, only replying over her shoulder. – "Suit yourself. And good luck with that, 'cause I have no idea where he is."

"Not this shit again! You just said where he is!"

Asuka's blood pressure promptly spiked back up. – "I said he's in a hospital! Are you deaf?!"

"Which one?!"

"Alright, that's it!" – This time, Mari couldn't stop the irate girl from leaping out of her chair and practically shoving her face into his as she glared him down from practically point-blank range, the whole class going quiet around them. – "I'm getting real tired of you, so let me put it in a way your flea-sized brain will understand: I. Do. Not. Know. Where. Nagisa. Is."

"Got that, dipshit?"

Tōji narrowed his eyes. – "If you weren't a girl, I would've knocked the stuffing out of ya by now."

"Really now? Let me tell you something, then." – She none-too-gently poked him in the chest. – "I can't stand sexist guys. So get the hell out of my face before I knock the stuffing out of you."

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**Geofront, AEL Headquarters**

**1619 hours**

Despite what some of her classmates thought, Rei was very far from emotionless. And right now, she felt irritated.

Throughout her life, she prided herself on her supreme emotional self-control. She mastered her mind and body to an extent other people would've admired, had they've known about it. With unparalleled precision, she was able to focus her mind on any task, utilizing her already high intelligence with maximum efficiency that bordered inhuman from the other side.

At least, that was the case until recently.

Rei never wanted it to be any different. But now, whenever she had an idle moment, her mind inevitably wandered towards him. She wanted, yearned, craved, to be with him... and the worst of it was that she didn't even know why. No one had ever managed to attract her attention to this extent, deliberately or not – and it was driving her crazy with frustration.

"Who are you?" – she whispered at the sleeping boy in front of her.

Even when she decided to humor herself and deal with the issue at hand by visiting him, it wasn't enough. Just sitting next to his bed watching him sleep wasn't enough. She wanted him to be awake, to talk to her, to reveal what she wanted to know - because there were many things about him she still didn't know. Such as why did he agree to work at the company (aside from subtle coercion by Yui). Or how was he able to hear the psychic communication of the alien entities the same way Rei herself did. Or how was he able to draw forth such an incredible power from his Evangelion.

Many questions for many things to know. Many questions for many things she wanted to know. And yet again, she didn't know why she wanted to know.
Just being near him gave her a very strange vibe. Having known him only for a month, she nevertheless felt as if she had known him for a much longer time than that. As if... she had always known him. She first noticed it while listening to Yui tutoring him about the Evangelions during sync tests, although she deliberately didn't show it. At the time, she had no reason to trust him with her feelings – not that it was any different now. She had no reason to trust him at all – because unlike most people, Rei did not consider risking one's own life alongside her in battle as worthy of trust. In fact, Rei just plain didn't trust anyone with her feelings, Yui included.

That is why for Rei, who had always been suspicious and mistrusting of strangers, the mere thought of a random somebody eliciting this reaction grated on her nerves.

Whether he was someone worthy of her trust or not was still undecided in her mind. She knew better than to leave herself open for betrayal.

Rei was very much aware of the camera in the corner behind her and knew her presence would raise questions sooner or later. Even so, she stood up and drew the privacy curtain, as what she was about to do was not meant for others' eyes. She slowly reached up and removed her shades, folding them up and setting them down onto the bedside counter before slipping out of her coat.

The bed slightly creaked under her weight as she climbed onto it, straddling the sleeping boy before bracing herself against the bed and leaning forward so far their foreheads touched.

Then she closed her eyes and entered a domain no ordinary people could.

It was at a very young age when Rei discovered she was capable of things no one ever mentioned. At first she believed that was because everyone else had them and took it for granted... but when Yui took an interest in her sixth sense, the girl realized she was unique. Even without actively reaching out, the mere presence of other people around her felt like being surrounded by a field of burning candles, their intangible auras brushing against her mind like a warm caress. Their emotional state was also an open book to her, to say nothing of their surface thoughts manifesting as an incessant whispering that got louder the closer she was to the source. Only when she was truly alone was when she heard and sensed nothing – and when she did, Rei found the cold silence very unsettling.

She had a unique connection with people. As much as she shunned to interact with them, the truth was that Rei Ikari didn't like being alone.

She also knew that people would see her as a freak of nature if her secret were to get out... to say nothing of her occasional nightmare about waking up on a white slab stinking of anesthetic, the blinding light above failing to obscure the gleam of the metal blade as it sank into her flesh to find out what other secrets her pale body might hold inside. That was why Rei never really confided in anyone; not even Yui knew the full extent of her powers. As far as the woman knew, Rei had a passive ability to sense people. However, the truth was that some of Rei's powers were very much of the active nature – and not just her ability to influence the minds of others. She knew for a fact the Vortigaunts were aware of her nature – mostly because Rei herself sought out the enigmatic aliens before to find answers she dared not ask from anyone else.

Just like how, as she once again sought answers, she was willing to invade another's mind to get them.

As soon as she divided the veil between their hearts, Rei was immediately surprised when she felt in him the exact same psychic potential she herself possessed, albeit shriveled and dormant from lack of use. Rei herself frequently honed her abilities until she mastered both her mind and her body; to her, Kaworu felt as if he had neglected both. Yet the power was still there, waiting to be unleashed.
'Did someone successfully replicate the Genesis experiment?' she wondered. There were many people who left the company after mother ended the project; could someone from that group be responsible? But he's the same age as me. It couldn't have taken place afterwards. Although...' she trailed off as a new theory occurred to her. 'I heard we're researching a chemical formula that, in cell cultures, has successfully accelerated cellular division. Maybe something similar was used to speed up his physical development...?' After a brief pondering, she dismissed that theory. 'No, his level of mental development should be that of a child in that case.'

'And the atrophy of his power... he must've never used it to have reached this level of degradation. Does he even know? Or is he refusing to use it by choice?'

Having failed to arrive to a decisive conclusion, Rei proceeded deeper. She saw him silently convulsing as his Evangelion mercilessly destroyed the entity they fought a week ago.

She saw him talking to her on the school roof.

She saw him stepping off the city’s PTG uplink pad and looking for the government official.

She saw a bloody-faced teenager screaming threats and obscenities as two others hauled him away while Kaworu helped a younger-looking boy up from the ground, immediately before a teacher roughly seized him by the shoulder.

She saw an eleven year old Kaworu wincing as he raised his bare foot and picked something off before continuing to climb a large pile of trash, pausing a few seconds later to yank a printed circuit board out of an old TV and shove it into the old bag hanging off his shoulder.

She saw a nine year old wrapping himself in a coat several sizes too large for him before continuing to stuff a large piece of cloth between the edge of a moldy fiberboard and the frame of the window said fiberboard was forced through, the crumbling plaster of the walls around him briefly being illuminated by lightning outside.

She saw a trembling six year old wade through waist-deep snow, scorched and tattered clothing barely providing any protection against the howling blizzard that chilled him to the bone.

Then for a fraction of a second, she saw fire before her mind slammed into the mental equivalent of a stone wall. The sudden resistance disoriented her somewhat, but she didn't fail to notice a shadow falling over her.

'I don't know how you're doing this, but I don't think you are supposed to be in here.' Tabris remarked edgily.

That was all Rei heard before she withdrew and broke the connection as fast as she could. Her body recoiled into a sitting position as if it was a spring, her clothes loudly rustling from the sudden movement.

'...what... was that?'

As she tried to calm her nerves, Rei realized her hand quickdrew her revolver on its own and was now shakily pointing the weapon directly at Kaworu's head. Never before did she encounter anything that upset her like that – but the shadow that lurked in the boy's mind was completely and utterly alien. At least the Vortigaunts she found common ground with – eventually – but this time, the presence felt not strange or unfamiliar, but plain wrong. Just a split-second contact was enough to trigger a primal reaction in the deepest recesses of her mind, with all of her instincts loudly screaming 'enemy' and her entire body breaking out into cold sweat.
Clenching her eyes shut, Rei reached out with her detection capabilities... and there it was. Piggybacking onto the bright red flare of Kaworu's presence was a tiny, blue light with tendrils reaching deeply into the boy's aura.

But she also didn't fail to notice the change in his presence that indicated him regaining consciousness. And sure enough, his eyes cracked open and focused on her.

The teens silently looked each other in the eye for several seconds before Kaworu quietly remarked – "...well, I didn't expect to wake up to this."

Rei slowly lowered her gun, her breathing returning to normal as she finally forced herself to calm down.

'You better watch yourself around her. She just tried to get into your head.'

Rei saw Kaworu's eyebrows creep slightly higher at that. – "Are you psychic or something?"

"Yes."

The answer slipped out an instant before she caught herself. She showed no outward sign but inwardly, she was cursing very loudly and violently at her slip-up, even though she knew very well he most likely wouldn't grasp the true implications of her admission. No, what she was upset about was the very fact that she slipped up at all. Even if it didn't have any consequences this time, what really prevented her from slipping up again and in front of someone who really shouldn't know?

In any case, Kaworu apparently wasn't asleep enough to miss what she said. – "...that was a rhetorical question."

On the other hand, there was a small voice at the back of her very self that told her she could trust him. A part of her wanted to trust him for reasons she didn't know. Normally that wouldn't fly with her under any circumstances but Rei learned very long ago that if there was one thing she could trust unconditionally, it was her own instincts. Those never betrayed her – never could betray her.

Which is why Rei chose to listen. – "Which I answered truthfully."

This time, a long silence ensued until Kaworu's brain caught up with the meaning of her words. – "...wait, you actually are psychic?"

"Yes."

"...huh." – the boy hummed tonelessly, his expression showing no surprise.

Rei raised an eyebrow at that. – "You are unusually receptive to the idea."

Kaworu shrugged. – "I'm working as a test pilot for a giant cyborg, fighting equally giant aliens. Compared to that, you being psychic ranks pretty low on the weirdness scale. Besides..." – He sighed and shifted a bit under the covers. – "I can't really afford to be excited about it. Doctor said I should try keeping my blood pressure low for a while; could burst a vein in my head."

"I see."

"Did you know that, by all rights, I shouldn't even be alive right now? Doctor's words, not mine." – At her lack of response, he shifted again. – "It's a bit funny, you know? Telling me that I almost didn't make it then expecting me to keep my cool, or else I won't make it. Scary, isn't it?"
"Are you afraid?" – Rei asked.

"Of course I am. After what happened, anyone would be afraid. I'm not some fearless tough guy or anything; it's if I wouldn't be afraid is what would be unnatural."

"You think being afraid is natural?"

"Well... I look at it this way. If I'd be dead, I wouldn't be afraid anymore. So in that sense, the fact that I'm still able to be afraid means that I'm still alive. That should count for something."

"I see."

They sat in silence for nearly a minute, Rei pondering over his words.

Kaworu's voice eventually broke her out of her thoughts. – "...are you going to keep sitting on me?"

"Are you in discomfort?"

"No, but someone might come in and misunderstand things. You know, they'd think we're intimate or something like that."

"It happened to you before?"

Kaworu shook his head – "I'm not the kind of guy who runs after girls. I'm not gay, I'm just... not interested in having a relationship. Maybe a few years later but right now, I'm not planning on dating anyone." – A moment later, Rei felt his mind silently adding 'Pity those girls in school didn't get the memo.'

'Instincts are a powerful force.' Tabris noted. 'Not that I'm familiar with the standards of what makes one attractive for your species.'

"I have been in a similar situation to yours before." – she blurted out suddenly.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Some boys apparently consider me sexually attractive. I had to make them aware of the fact that do not reciprocate their feelings."

"Is that why they call you Ice Queen Ikari? No offense." – he quickly added.

"None taken. I am aware of that nickname."

Kaworu nodded before something occurred to him. – "I guess this means you can read my mind?"

Rei hesitated a bit before replying, her prior misgivings still not completely abated. – "In a sense."

'We ran into each other while she was peeking at your memories.' Tabris supplied before pausing. 'I guess this means you can also hear me?'

"Indeed. Who are you?"

'You may call me Tabris. I am an Angel of the Eternal.'

Rei's eyes suddenly widened quite a bit. – "An angel? Are you..." – She hesitated before uttering – "...an angel of God?"
Tabris' response was a groan of undisguised irritation. *By the endless universe, not THIS superstitious idiocy! I haven't been on this planet for two thousand years and you STILL haven't outgrown those beliefs?*

Truth be told, right now Rei was probably the most confused she ever was in her life. – "...what do you mean?"

'That this isn't the first time I've heard that. And unfortunately, it most likely won't be the last time either. But to answer your question, no. I am not an agent of whatever deity you're worshiping because the Eternal is not a deity. He's just... is.'

"And God said unto Moses, 'I am that I am'. And He said, 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, 'I am hath sent me unto you.'" – Rei whispered, a bit pale.

'Quote ancient literature all you want. Just don't make the mistake of deifying the Eternal in front of one of the more fanatic Angels; they just might kill you for it, despite acting the same themselves. Hypocrisy isn't unique to mortals, unfortunately.'

Kaworu took a glance at Rei's deer-in-headlights look and sighed before looking upwards at the ceiling. – "Did you really had to do that?"

'Is it my fault that she chose to believe in such superstition?'

"No, but you're still being an ass about it. Cut it out."

Tabris huffed. 'You Lilim are unbelievable. You have institutions for the mentally ill but you're still coddling the superstitious? That is exactly the reason why you are still confined to your own planet.'

"We are not confined." – Rei interjected, her voice a bit stronger as she recovered from her earlier shock. – "We are capable of interstellar travel."

'Wherever you have your vaunted Waygates, that is.' Tabris pointed out. 'However, what happens if you have to go to a location with no Waygate?'

"We have advanced point-to-point teleportation technology." – Rei replied, her mind flashing back to physics class in her old elementary school. – "It is how we deploy the Waygates after they are prefabricated at Bifrost Station in low orbit around Sol."

'But if you have a form of faster than light transportation that doesn’t rely on fixed departure and destination points, why are you still using Waygates?'

"That method has a distance limitation of several hundred thousand kilometers." – she replied again, now flashing back to a technical article she read a few years ago. – "Beyond that, too much radiation is produced to safely transport organic matter."

'And that is why your kind is still a century too early to believe they're on the top of the world. I know about races and civilizations far more advanced than yours; all of them are extinct. You don’t have the luxury of wasting time on superstitions like religion or patting yourselves on the shoulder about what you've achieved, especially not under the current circumstances. And that is all I’m going to say to you.' Tabris declared with a tone of finality.

Once again, Kaworu was the one who broke the awkward silence. – "Sorry about that. I mean, you
told me before that you're religious."

"I have a question." – Rei said abruptly, stuffing her revolver back into its empty shoulder holster before nimbly getting off the bed.

"What is it?" – he asked as she snatched up her coat.

The girl hesitated before saying the thought that was on the forefront of her mind. – "Your condition... your fear... your unwillingness to enter a relationship... why did you tell me all that?"

He shrugged. – "I'm alone here all day. I just felt like talking to you." – He looked at the ceiling again. – "Besides, you have a much better bedside manner than a certain voice in my head I wasn't sure was real up to this point."

'Didn't I tell you I was real? Several times now?'

"I'm pretty sure schizophrenic people are also convinced that the voices they hear is real." – Kaworu pointed out.

"Indeed."

The change in Rei's speech style – that is, the way how she suddenly uses normal speech patterns while thinking – is completely deliberate, by the way. She speaks in that formal and methodical way she normally does out of choice, not because she's unable to speak otherwise. Also, take note of the color of the respective auras of Kaworu and Tabris: I wanted to make it absolutely clear that Kaworu is NOT an Angel this time. Of course, something is still up with him; keep reading to find out what.

The phrase Rei quotes while talking to Tabris is Exodus 3:14 from the Bible. It's what God replies to Moses when the latter asks for His name; the phrase 'I am that I am' (ehyeh ašer ehyeh) is considered to be one of the seven names of God by Jewish tradition and Kabbalism.
"Good morning, Nagisa. How are you feeling?" – Sanada said as he walked into the infirmary, the automatic door closing behind him with a quiet hiss.

Kaworu sat up on the bed. – "Good, I think."

"Any headache?"

"None."

"That's good. I've been looking at your most recent MRI scans and I have to say, I'm impressed." – The man sat onto the edge of the bed before turning his attention to his tablet, bringing up a medical readout he showed to the teen. – "The burst veins in your brain have almost completely healed, with no signs of lasting damage."

Kaworu shrugged at that. – "Well, I've always healed quickly. I mean, you know how you scratch yourself and it stays for a few days? For me, it disappears before the end of the day. I never really understood why."

"Everyone heals at a different rate and being malnourished affects it negatively, even in completely healthy individuals." – Sanada explained. – "I've seen some signs of long-term malnourishment in your body, but you seem to have recovered recently. Still, your rate of regeneration is truly remarkable. Speaking of which, can I take a look at that?" – he said, pointing at a white patch peeking out from behind Kaworu's neck.

"Sure." – The teen turned to the side and tilted his head forward to expose the bandage on the edge of his hairline. Sanada carefully separated the medical tape from Kaworu's skin and peeled back the tissue to expose a small, red line on the teen's pale skin, the telltale twin lines of dots indicative of a recently removed suture barely visible.

"Looks good here too." – the doctor said before reapplying the medical tape.

"How did I get injured back there, anyway?" – Kaworu asked as he settled back onto the bed. – "Did I hit my head while I was out?"

"No. It's not a well-known fact but in an aneurysm, it's not the bleeding that does most of the damage. That blood doesn't just magically vanish but stays in the skull, increasing intracranial pressure. The pressure is what kills the nerve cells." – the man explained.

"I see, but... how does this come into it?"

"We had to perform an emergency craniectomy on you."

"...which is?"

"Essentially, we drilled a hole through your skull to relieve the pressure."

Kaworu winced. – "Ouch. That doesn't sound very good."
Sanada motioned across the room. – "We have the best medical equipment outside the city's hospital; if it wasn't for that, you wouldn't have made it. Even so, there was no time to call in a neurosurgeon so I made the incision and brought the drill to bear myself." – He smirked. – "Good thing I have steady hands, isn't it?"

"Well... yeah. Thanks."

The doctor made a dismissive gesture. – "Saving your life is what I'm here for. If you really want to thank someone, it's doctor Ikari. It was her idea to be prepared for anything that might happen – and seeing as you're sitting here alive and well instead of lying dead in a coroner's freezer, I'd say it paid off. Make no mistake, though; the only reason why I haven't sent you to a proper hospital is because it would've been hard to explain what happened to you without blowing our cover. If I wouldn't have been sure of what I was doing, I wouldn't have taken any chances."

Inwardly, Sanada added 'Even though I was sweating there for a while... I knew his bone tissue is dense but I had no idea it would be as hard as quartz; must be the androgens from puberty. Good thing we had that diamond drill Yui ordered for Rei a few years ago.' He didn't say it out loud, though; he knew that doing so would raise more questions in the teen's mind. Questions he didn't want to – and hoped he'd never have to – answer.

"Thanks anyway. Why did you drill the hole back there, though?"

"Every minute counts during a decompressive craniectomy. I didn't want to waste time shaving your head to make room elsewhere, and I don't think you would have appreciated me going in through your forehead where everybody can see the scar." – He emphasized his point by lightly poking the teen's forehead. – "I know emergency surgery isn't about aesthetics, but I had the option and decided to take it."

Kaworu nodded. – "Okay, I get it now." – Then something else occurred to him. – "What about the blood in my head? Did you wash your brain down or something to get it out?"

"I had to make a tiny hole in your dura mater but once it had a hole to leave through, whatever wanted to came out came out on its own until the pressure equalized. The rest either belongs in there or will be absorbed, and MRI says the hole already knitted itself back together. Don't you worry about it." – the doctor assured him.

"What about the hole in my skull?"

"It's a very small hole; the bone will grow back in time. I know it sounds bad but don't worry. You're in the clear now and I say that as the doctor in charge. In fact..." – He picked up his tablet again. – "I think it's time we established your proper medical record. Normally, it would've been done when you joined the company but I was attending a medical conference in White Forest at the time."

"Okay..." – Kaworu said slowly. – "What exactly do you want?"

"Just a few questions, nothing serious. Aside from your quick healing, have you noticed any unusual medical matters involving yourself?"

Kaworu drummed his fingers on his knee while considering the question. – "Does not being the sickly type count?" – he asked uncertainly. – "I mean, I only remember one, maybe two times I ever got sick."

"I see." – Sanada typed something on the tablet. – "Does that include childhood diseases, like chicken pox?"
"Actually, I never got that one."

The man looked up at that. – "Really?"

"I remember there was that one time back in elementary school; I was... eight at the time? I think so. Anyway, the school was closed for two weeks because of a chicken pox outbreak. Pretty much everybody in my class was infected; even some of the teachers called in sick leave. I, however, was completely fine: no fever, no itching, nothing."

The man hummed to himself before typing on his tablet. – "Which school was it?"

"Volksschule Inzersdorf, on the 23rd suburb district Draschestraße." – Kaworu replied, the German words flowing from his tongue with the fluency of a native speaker.

"In Vienna?"

"Yes. Why?"

Sanada shook his head dismissively. – "It's not important; I thought maybe I could find something about it in the news. I take it then that you're not prone to having the flu either?"

"No, didn't have that one either."

Sanada typed on the tablet again. – "Did you get all your inoculations?"

Kaworu hesitated at that. – "Well... you know I have a bit of a problem with my long-term memory, right?"

"I do."

"Then you understand that I can't tell what inoculations I got, if I even got any." – Kaworu pointed out.

"Of course. And this memory problem of yours... what can you tell me about it?"

The teen shrugged. – "It's just that: I can't remember anything from when I was little."

Kaworu didn't notice but Sanada's eyes narrowed a bit. – "What's the first thing you remember, then?"

"Cold." – Kaworu replied immediately. – "It was winter in '34; February, I think."

"Your file said your memory only went back to the age of seven."

"I turned 7 that September."

"Fair enough." – Sanada admitted. – "How did you get your name? Was that something you remembered?"

"Yeah, but I didn't know how to write it. One of my teachers looked it up for me." – Kaworu chuckled a bit. – "I don't suppose you find it familiar?"

"I can't help you there. Nagisa is a relatively common name in Japan – as is Kaworu, though that particular spelling was already outdated by Second Impact."

Kaworu shrugged again. – "It was worth a try, I guess."
"In any case, I think I found what kind of problem you have. So you can't recall anything that happened before that but you don't have any problems making new memories?"

"That's right." – the teen replied, now paying attention.

"That sounds like psychogenic amnesia. MRI showed no signs of physical brain damage either, so it wasn't caused by injury. Thus, the most likely candidate is dissociative amnesia."

Kaworu's eyebrows slightly raised at the unfamiliar term. – "Meaning?"

"You can't remember because something bad happened to you." – Sanada explained. – "Something so bad, your brain decided it was better off not remembering."

Kaworu sat in silence for a long while, pondering over Sanada's words.

"It... kinda makes sense." – he finally said. - "I mean... I've been living on my own, with no parents. They never looked for me, so... maybe they couldn't? Because they were dead? Maybe I saw my parents die and that's why I can't remember?"

"It's possible but there's no way to know." – the doctor replied. – "Not without your memories coming back. But then again, psychology and memory disorders aren't my field of expertise; I can look the topic up in medical archives but that's about all I can help with this."

"Is there any cure for this?"

Sanada shook his head. – "Not that current medical science knows of. It tends to go away on its own, though that can take anywhere between months and years."

"More like years in my case." – Kaworu added morosely.

"You can look at it this way." – Sanada opined, shifting on the bed's edge to resume blood circulation for his numb legs. – "Are those memories absolutely necessary for you? You began as an orphan on the streets and yet, you're already more than halfway through growing up without having had anyone to rely on. As far as I'm concerned, you have every right to feel a sense of accomplishment for yourself."

"I know. It's not that I absolutely have to know. I can live without it, but still... it'd be nice to know."

"I can imagine." – Sanada paused before quietly adding – "Should we continue with the medical record or do you want to stop?"

"I'm good." – Kaworu replied without hesitation.

The doctor nodded. – "Alright then. Do you have any allergies?"

"None that I know of."

"Any serious injuries in the past, like broken bones?"

"None, although..." – Kaworu pushed his covers aside and raised his left leg, using his finger to trace a faint scar across the bottom of his foot. – "I once stepped into broken glass when I was in a scrapyard."

Sanada winced. – "I assume it got infected?"

"That's the funny thing: it didn't." – At the man's expression, Kaworu added – "Yeah, the local
Same time

"So the doc says the kid is okay to go home?" – Shephard asked with undisguised skepticism.

Yui nodded. – "That's correct."

"Why so soon? Sanada told me what happened; shouldn't something like this get you hospitalized for weeks?"

"Doctor Sanada is not a novice. I trust his judgment." – the scientist replied with a definitive tone of finality.

Shephard shrugged. – "If you say so, doc. Not that I agree with it, but still."

"Are you concerned he might relapse?"

"Nagisa's not my kid but that doesn't mean I don't care about him." – the man said, leaning back in his chair with a groan. – "Nobody deserves to end up six feet under because of someone else's fuckup."

"Language, colonel."

Shephard rolled his eyes at her reprimand. – "Anyway. Would the kid's injury affect his ability to pilot?"

"That's something I intend to find out for myself." – she replied. – "Before he's discharged tomorrow, mister Nagisa will participate in a synchronization test."

That was something the man didn't expect. – "Oh. Okay." – After a few moments of silence, his head perked up. – "Speaking of which, how's his ride?"

Yui worked her terminal to bring up the latest maintenance reports on Unit-01 and was satisfied to see no sudden bad news. – "External damage was superficial and no internal damage was found, nor did mister Nagisa's condition affect the neural interface."

"How about the other one? You said something about its joints being defective."

"Examination on Unit-00 revealed nothing that requires our intervention at this time." – She closed the maintenance report, the holographic screen vanishing from above her desk. – "All in all, the latest engagement is far from being a colossal failure. Neither of the Evangelions have been lost or damaged sufficiently enough to overstretch our budget. The combat data from this engagement will also help speed up the project's development." – The corner of Yui's mouth curled upwards a bit. – "I'm actually considering granting a pay bonus to the pilots as compensation for their performance."

"I bet they'd like that." – Shephard quipped.

"As a matter of fact, Rei doesn't seem to be very concerned over her salary. Now mister Nagisa, on the other hand..."

"You know, it's kinda weird to see a fourteen year old make more than I do." – He sighed. – "Good thing my girl doesn't know, or I'd never hear the end of it. Nor would Nagisa."

"I take it then that she's not suspicious?"
He gave a dismissive shrug. – "Nah, the kid gave her no reason to suspect anything. Hell, I've never seen anyone so conservative with money as him, let alone a teenager with cash to spend. You know what those are usually like."

"I do." – she confirmed.

"Nagisa's nothing like that. You saw the usual getup he's in, white shirt, black pants? That's about the only kind of clothing he has, but does he go and get anything else? Nope, he only spends money on food." – After a momentary pause, he added – "Well, food and alcohol. And he doesn't even buy that much alcohol, so he has quite a bit of money left over. I have no idea why."

"That will probably serve him well in life."

Shephard smirked. – "Maybe you could hire him as a financial consultant." – he joked. His tone quickly turned serious, however. – "On that note... do you have anything with more firepower than the guns we used last time? Because if it weren't for that spear, we might have bit the dust back there. I mean, the kids did manage to hurt that thing by shooting it in the back, but I'd rather not gambit on the next one just letting us do the same."

Yui nodded at that. – "Indeed. I have already forwarded our findings to Gehirn but as you know, we can't expect a reply within the next two weeks."

"Yeah, yeah... I've been an errand boy before. Most boring job ever."

And the man wasn't exaggerating. No matter how advanced Waygates were, even humanity's best minds couldn't figure out a way to transmit information across interstellar distances; the space between dimensions commonly referred to as xenspace, while crucial for FTL travel and teleportation of all kinds, also happened to be saturated with enough diffuse electromagnetic radiation to completely whiteout any and all kinds of radio receivers, from radar to transponders to communication gear. While ships transiting in visual range of each other could still use laser transceivers, communication beyond visual range was simply impossible. Thus, the only way for the various human star systems to stay in touch with each other was to have couriers make continuous back-and-forth journeys.

Among those in the military, being designated as courier was widely regarded as the worst job a service member can get, specifically because of the sheer boredom of spending several weeks cooped up in a small spacecraft hurtling through xenspace at 99.187856 times the speed of light. Even the Proteus system, the one closest to Sol, was a week away by waygate, translating into a two-week round trip not including the time it would take the other side to formulate a reply. It was no surprise then that humanity set up its colonies specifically to be able to operate without day-to-day oversight from Earth.

"You know, doc..." – Shephard mused. – "I was wondering about one thing. How did you get Gehirn to participate in this?"

"I have connections."

"I gathered that." – he deadpanned. – "What kind?"

Yui rested her elbows on her desk, hands steepling in front of her chin. – "Do you know the CEO of Gehirn?"

"Gendo Rokubungi? He's the guy who makes our guns, of course I know him. Not personally, of course. Acquaintance of yours?"
Above her hands, the woman's mouth drew into a thin, almost cold smirk before she replied – "Ex-husband."

Shephard winced. – "Ouch. Didn't know you used to be married."

"Not anymore. We had a... falling out."

Backing away from the desk slightly, Yui turned her chair to face the window behind her desk, gazing at the green landscape of the Geofront outside.

"It's a personal matter I don't wish to discuss but he left the company at the same time and went on to found Gehirn." – she continued. – "I don't exactly know how he secured the personal backing of President Keel in the process, but he did."

"He used to work here?"

She nodded. – "He and I were among the co-founders of the company. The Evangelion was a joint proposal between the two of us, but he worked mainly at the cybernetics research division. My field is genetics – so one could say that our respective skill sets complimented each other to produce the final result you have already seen."

"And now he's the top dog of a heavy industry megacorporation making weapons for your giant cyborgs." – the man clarified in a flat tone.

"Indeed, and I'm aware of how ironic the situation is."

"Did you fire him?"

Yui made a 'not-quite' gesture with her hand. – "It was before I became CEO. I was on the executive board as a project lead, but the board found him in severe violation of the corporation's ethical codex and terminated his employment." – She finally rested her hand in front of her chin again. – "While the final word wasn't mine, you could say that I did have a hand in his departure."

"There's the problem." – Shephard pointed out. – "Aren't you worried he'll try to copy the Evangelions to undercut you?"

"If he would, I can and will take him to court for industrial espionage and he knows that." – she replied immediately. – "Be that as it may, I have been paying close attention to Gehirn's activities exactly for that reason. Their cybernetics division seems to be mostly focused on human applications of the technology, but we can never be too sure."

"I see." – As an afterthought, he added – "I know we've butted heads so far and will most likely continue to do so... but remind me not to get on your bad side in the future."

"That would be a wise decision, colonel."

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*Kaworu is natively speaking the Viennese sub-dialect of Central Austro-Bavarian. It's pretty much the German equivalent of a Southern US accent and is one of the reasons I toned down non-English dialogue in the rewrite: I'm not a native German speaker and while I could improvise with online translator sites and/or asking Asukaner117 on Evageeks to translate for me as I have done before, regional dialects are a whole another thing. I'm more likely than not to get it wrong, hence why I decided against it.*
Some readers might be aware of the real-life stipulation that information cannot be transferred faster than light. The reason why that is so is because of the implications it presents. Knowing about something allows one to act on that knowledge – but acting on it before you are physically capable of acquiring that knowledge means responding to something you don’t know about and thus cannot respond to, violating causality by making effect come before cause. Therefore, the impossibility of FTL information transfer isn’t a physical limitation like the speed of light, but a logical consequence of that limitation.

It is possible to bypass this limitation by introducing a physical medium capable of transmitting information faster than light without breaking the laws of physics – and indeed, many science fiction works utilize hyperspace, subspace, or the local equivalent to do it. Some harder sci-fi works (Avatar, Mass Effect) use quantum entanglement, a bizarre phenomenon where a pair of subatomic particles are in a state where they cannot be measured individually, only together; as one particle’s quantum state changes, the other instantly changes in the perfectly opposite way to maintain the system’s combined quantum state, no matter how far away the two are from each other. Interestingly, QE is an actual thing in real life that has been experimentally proven to be true, despite even Einstein insisting it cannot be true specifically because it breaks the lightspeed limit with the instantaneous propagation of the change in quantum state. Whether QE can be used for information transfer is currently unknown, as physical interaction with a particle causes a wave function collapse that allows it to be measured – thus, altering or even observing the quantum state of one side of the entanglement immediately breaks the entanglement.

While humanity's understanding in SCE about theoretical physics is ahead of ours – their overall tech level is roughly analogous to that of the Kushan in Homeworld –, they haven’t cracked QE information transfer yet. As all currently known forms of communication rely on electromagnetic waves, transmitting through xenspace is not possible either due to interference. Nor is it possible to just print the message onto paper, then teleport the paper to the destination because teleportation over interstellar distances is too energy-intensive to be economical. Also, one shouldn’t forget how large space is. The larger the distance, the larger the deviation produced by the same amount of error. Even with a supercomputer calculating the destination coordinates, that paper can arrive anywhere within several hundred astronomical units (1 AU = 149,597,870.7 km / 92,955,807 mi, as per the International Astronomical Union’s 2012 definition) of the intended destination.

Waygates can cover roughly 0.8857 parsecs (1 pc = 3.2615638 light years, as per the IAU’s August 2015 redefinition) per day. The closest star to the Sun is 1.3 parsecs away. The Proteus system Gehirn’s headquarters is located in (mentioned by Kensuke in chapter 3) is supposed to be Gliese 581, a real red dwarf star 20 light years away from Earth. It is not an exact copy of the real star system, however, due to recent developments and discoveries regarding the real deal contradicting its portrayal in the story.
"All systems online and operational. Tertiary synchronization achieved."

"How is the pilot doing?"

At her terminal, Maya scrolled down on the holographic screen before replying. – "All values are normal, no detectable noise. Neural response time is unchanged."

Behind her, Yui let out an almost silent sigh of relief. – "Excellent. Continue monitoring his state and report any abnormalities." – she ordered before giving a meaningful look to Sanada, who was waiting nearby.

"Yes, ma'am."

Unseen to the technicians, Yui and Sanada retreated to the back of the observation room. As soon as they were out of earshot, Yui turned to the doctor. – "I've looked over the data you sent me. I assume it's accurate?" – she asked with a hushed voice.

Sanada nodded. – "All of it based on what we observed, as well as what he said."

"The correlation between him and Rei is quite close." – she noted. – "Having her as cross-reference is useful, but we'll have to dig up the old files for anything definite."

"You're going to restart the project?"

"Of course not." – Yui replied immediately. – "We almost crossed a line back then. I've learned my lesson. Still, I have to know how much he developed in the past ten years and in what direction; it might help us avoid a repeat of what happened last time." – She glanced at Unit-01's form beyond the observation window. – "Though I honestly hope it won't come to that."

"What should I tell my staff? Sooner or later, someone will notice and start asking questions."

"No comment. If we explicitly order them to not discuss it, they will realize we're hiding something. Just tell them not to worry about it."

"Alright."

Neither of them noticed Rei standing on the other side of the observation room, facing the window but subtly watching the whispering adults from the corner of her eye.

She, of course, picked up every word with her enhanced senses. Rei also knew what they talked about; after all, it related to the very reason why she developed a general lack of trust towards other people. Both reasons, to be exact – and only one of them involved her directly.

She still remembered the most powerful emotions she felt in her adoptive mother when the latter took her in. Shame and remorse. As much as the woman took care of all her needs and as young as Rei herself was, she still realized that Yui was primarily driven by atonement, not love. That was ultimately why Rei never bonded with Yui as a daughter to her mother. And it's not like anyone was
different in that regard: no one ever loved or appreciated her for who she was. It was always ultimately about objectifying her to satisfy their own desires, to get from her what they wanted without having to give up anything in return. Just a means to an end. Student, object of sexual fantasies, employee, test subject... the exact term didn't matter.

She hated it. She hated every time someone looked her way, even briefly. The trenchcoat could hide her body, but it couldn't hide her. A hostile attitude and appearance might scare people into leaving her alone, but it couldn't influence their thoughts. At times, Rei wanted nothing more than to run away and hide, out of sight and out of mind. Other times, she was sorely tempted to just massacre everyone in sight so that they would stop thinking about her – or even acknowledging her existence. On the other hand, she ended up bonding with Lilith almost immediately upon being introduced. The scientists in charge of monitoring the AI's psychological development certainly didn't expect it, that much they both knew. Still, Rei reached out and Lilith reciprocated, the two naturally finding common ground in the nature of their existence. While Lilith had a friendly and polite attitude towards everyone, only with Rei did she share an almost familial connection – and on Rei's side, the AI felt to her like an elder sister she never had. No one else had ever gotten anywhere close to the point where Rei appreciated even their mere presence in her life.

Until recently, that is.

While it helped alleviate some of her doubts, her impromptu meeting with Kaworu two days before ultimately ended up raising even more questions than what she found answers for. Rei spent the next night devoid of sleep, silently staring at the ceiling of her room in the darkness as she pondered the recent revelations that shook her entire worldview – and not because of Tabris, an actual Angel, calling her beliefs into question. Rei always looked at religion as spiritual guidance, not a way of life. While she was an active practitioner and occasionally went to church after service to pray, the girl was not officially part of any congregation, partly because of the fact that her interpretation was not in line with any denominations she knew of.

Her reasoning for her unique interpretation of the scripture was simple: the source material was written by humans and humans are fallible, especially when it comes to recording the acts of a great person without embellishment. Therefore, the Bible shouldn't be trusted as perfectly accurate in all matters. That alone she knew would offend a great majority of priests and some of the more fervent congregations, hence why she chose to practice her beliefs by herself. And because not having been baptized meant she wouldn't be able to take part in liturgical rites anyway.

Then there was the other matter she discovered that day. All her life, Rei thought she was unique and thus, no one could possibly understand her. Him, however... he was just like her, even if he didn't know it. As far as Rei was concerned, he was the only person in the entire world who had even a slight chance of understanding her – and on some level, Rei desperately wanted to be accepted by that person.

That is why Rei eventually turned around and quietly walked to an unoccupied terminal in the corner. As an AEL employee, she had a MAGI user account and familiarity in its use. What very few people at the company knew was that Rei actually had top-level privileged access to the company's research archives, second only to Yui.

Bringing up the user interface, the girl first pulled up a communication log to Unit-01. Confirming that no actual person was currently monitoring the entry plug's audiovisual feed, Rei requested a secure communication channel. After a few seconds of delay – during which she knew Adam was evaluating the incoming request –, Kaworu's image popped up in a window.

"I have a request." – Rei said bluntly, not even bothering with a greeting.
Kaworu blinked in surprise at her sudden appearance. – "That's kinda abrupt. What is it?"

"May I accompany you to your home? There are certain issues I wish to discuss in private."

"The colonel's taking me home. Have you told him?"

"Not yet."

"What do you want to talk about anyway? I mean, can't you just say it right now?"

Without showing any outward signs, Rei briefly flashed her enhanced senses towards the adults in the room to verify she wasn't anyone's center of attention before continuing. – "It is meant for you only. Adam is monitoring the channel as well."

Kaworu sighed at that and glared at the top of the entry plug. – "It isn't nice to eavesdrop on people."

"Advisory: all inbound and outbound communications are parsed by this platform." – the AI replied. – "Communication protocols inoperable otherwise."

"So you're saying you can't help it?"

"Confirmation."

"Just a simple 'yes' would be enough." – He turned back to Rei. – "Anyway, I don't have a problem with you coming, but you should ask the colonel anyway, just in case."

Tokyo-2, Outer District 6
1752 hours

"So... welcome back home, kid." – Shephard quipped as he unlocked the apartment's door. – "Hope it's not a problem I haven't organized a welcoming party for you."

"No, it's fine. I'm not the partygoer type anyway."

"I guessed that." – The man glanced over Kaworu's shoulder, at Rei's dark form in the doorway. – "I didn't expect her to tag along, though."

"I will not stay for very long." – Rei replied, walking inside without pausing for even a moment.

Shephard shrugged nonchalantly. – "I don't have the slightest problem with you being here, but I'm not the one who owns this place. If he says you can stay, that's his call." – With that, he retreated to the kitchen.

As soon as the adult was out of earshot, Kaworu turned to Rei. – "Are you going to tell me what you wanted now, or should we go to my room?"

"I would prefer the privacy of your room."

Truth be told, Kaworu was also looking forward to being back in his usual quarters. Even an entire week couldn't make him get completely used to the infirmary, leaving him feel out of place. While he didn't live in the apartment for long either, at least it was a place he could call his own instead of being one where he only stayed at for someone else's convenience.

The only way to his room, however, passed by Asuka's room. And the occupant of said room evidently knew this, leaning against her own door's frame. – "And the prodigal son returns." – she
remarked snidely when the two drew near. – "Or you'd prefer 'lost sheep'?"

"Neither, actually." – Kaworu shot back.

"And you even brought your girlfriend with you. Celebrating your discharge with a roll in the hay?" Kaworu opened his mouth to answer but Rei beat him to it. – "I am not sexually attracted to him."

Asuka just smirked at that. – "Hear that? Even she thinks you're ugly."

"And she's not my girlfriend!" – Kaworu shot back again, his irritation rising.

The blonde just sighed and ducked back into her room with a dismissive wave. – "Sure, sure, whatever. Just keep it down." – With that, she slammed her door.

Only when she was out of sight did Kaworu released the groan of annoyance he's been holding back. – "Just ignore her. Seriously... what the hell is her problem?"

"She believes we are about to perform sexual acts in your room." – Rei deadpanned.

As weird as that statement sounded, Kaworu suspected he knew how she got that piece of information. – "And she calls me a pervert..." – he muttered under his breath.

The rest of the way to Kaworu's room thankfully went by without incident.

"Alright then... what did you want to talk to me so badly about?"

In response, Rei merely lifted a hand to eye level, palm facing upwards as if she was holding something. And before Kaworu could question, one of the smaller circuit boards on his desk abruptly flew into the air, coming to a stop in mid-air over her hand.

"...okay, that's pretty cool."

"I believed a physical demonstration was necessary to prove my claims from yesterday." – Rei said, twirling the board in the air. She then turned her back to him and held her hand to the side. The board immediately shot out towards Kaworu, only slowing down to orbit the startled teen's head a few times before returning to her. Then a screwdriver and a spool of soldering tin lifted off his desk as well, joining the board in a three-body orbit around her.

Before he could catch himself, Kaworu found himself asking – "How many of those can you hold up at once?"

"My personal record was fifteen separate objects."

That he didn't expect. – "Fifteen?! How the hell are you doing that?!"

"You are not capable of replicating it, then?"

"Of course not! I'm not a psychic."

"You are wrong." – Rei replied flatly. – "I sensed it in the infirmary. You possess this power as well, although you never seem to have used it."

Kaworu shook his head vigorously. – "You got it wrong. I don't have anything like this."

"Your ignorance of it explains why you are unable to use it yourself. Disuse has caused it to
atrophy."

Cutting off his reply, Rei suddenly looked at the door and the objects around her all dropped to the ground.

"What is it?"

"We are being eavesdropped upon." – She looked back at him. – "Am I allowed to use physical violence in dissuading her from further interruptions?"

This time, Kaworu couldn't resist rolling his eyes in exasperation. – "Oh, for... I don't think that'll be necessary." – Marching to the door, Kaworu loudly banged his fist on it. – "Get lost!"

"...you're no fun." – Asuka muttered on the other side before leaving.

Once he couldn't hear the intruder anymore, Kaworu returned his attention to Rei. – "Do you think she left?"

"For now. But not for good."

Kaworu sighed. – "She really thinks we're about to have sex, doesn't she?"

"Indeed."

For the sake of his own sanity, he decided a quick change of subject was in order. – "Anyway... you were saying you're psychic and can detect other psychics?"

"That is correct." – she confirmed.

"And you think I might be one too?"

"It is not a hypothesis. I know for certain that you are."

At that moment, something suddenly occurred to the boy and he pointed at the door. – "And that just now... you can sense normal people too?"

Rei nodded. – "That is where my suspicion initially arose from. Your presence is unlike the others'."

Kaworu mulled over that for a while. – "Even so..." – he said finally. – "what's the point, really? I have this but I can't use it, you said so yourself."

"You might still be able to restore it... with training. I am adept in its use and may be able to help."

"But why are you telling me this?" – he pressed. – "Hell, why are you even talking to me about this after asking me not to tell it to anyone?"

Expecting another deadpan reply, Kaworu was surprised to see Rei averting her eyes from him before quietly saying – "...I don't know."

"What?"

"We are alike, but... I... I can't explain. Your presence feels... odd."

Kaworu had seen Rei plenty of times. Never before, however, did he see her visibly hesitate with uncertainty – and a distant, deep corner of his mind felt strangely uneasy at seeing her like that.
Blinking at the sudden feeling, he shook his uneasiness off. – "You mean Tabris?"

"No. It is you in particular. I feel as if I have... always known you."

"...really?"

"Yes."

A long silence settled over the room.

Rei expected him to, among other things, call her crazy. What she didn't expect at all was to hear him chuckle. – "...that's really weird. I feel the same way about you."

Her head perked up at that. – "You do?"

"I first noticed it around the time when I went to your place. You know, when I saw your tattoo?"

Rei's expression hardened. – "I believe I told you not to mention it again."

"Don't worry, I haven't told anyone. I just found it strange, that's all. I mean, it's just like mine."

"...what are you talking about?"

"I have a tattoo on my arm too. It even looks like yours."

Kaworu didn't even see her arm move before he found himself staring down the barrel of her revolver.

"Are you mocking me?" – she asked with cold fury.

"Not at all."

"Then show me." – she demanded, gesturing with her weapon.

He didn't have the slightest idea what set her off like that. But for some reason, that tattoo seemed to agitate her to near-homicidal levels – and while he wasn't exactly scared from her sudden hostility, common sense told him not to antagonize anyone pointing a lethal weapon in his general direction. So he complied, unbuttoning his shirt and sliding it off his shoulder, mentally wondering whether she was jealous.

That train of thought was promptly derailed by the sound of her weapon hitting the floor, causing him to look up.

Kaworu honestly never would've thought that the pale girl could get even paler. But not only she did just that, her expression was one of complete and utter shock.

A moment later, she yanked his arm closer with a vice grip and practically screamed. – "WHERE DID YOU GET THIS?!" – she demanded.

"I don't know! I've always had it, for as long as I can remember!"

She let go of his arm at that... only to backpedal across the entire room before collapsing against the far wall, face veiled by her hair.

Kaworu opened his mouth to ask – "Is... something wro-"
"黙れ!" – she suddenly barked at him. Kaworu didn't understand what she said, but her tone was enough to get the meaning across: *shut up.*

She remained cowering on the ground in an almost fetal pose for several minutes, with only her quivering breathing making any sound at all. Eventually, Rei seemed to get a grasp on her composure and slowly got back to her feet, only to suddenly stride towards him with purpose. Her unreadable expression almost caused Kaworu to take a step backwards before she stepped up to him... and wordlessly pulled him into a bear hug.

Kaworu had absolutely nothing to say to that.

Confusion wasn't the only thing he felt, however. That hidden part of his brain he wasn't aware of before felt... *content.* Comfortable. As if a severed part of him just returned and healed the gaping wound it left, making him whole again. Kaworu was never the touchy-feely type but right now, he *wanted* her to be around. And for some unfathomable reason, he just *knew* she felt the *exact* same way.

They stood like that for what felt to him like an hour. Rei clung him as if her life depended on it and that hidden part nagged at him to not let her go, no matter what happens... especially when he felt a tremor run across her body, accompanied by the sound of a repressed sob.

She was crying.

And as soon as he made that realization, that unexplainable uneasiness reared its head again, albeit not drowning out the comfortableness.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"...don't... do anything..." – he heard her force out between sobs. – "Just let... let me stay like this..."

So he did.

After what seemed like an eternity, Rei slowly detached from him and took a step back before briefly pushing her shades up to wipe her eyes with her sleeve. – "I will leave now." – she said quietly, her voice wavering.

He had absolutely no idea what was going on. But on some level, something had changed. He didn't know what or even how he knew; he just did.

"Will you attend school tomorrow?" – she asked suddenly, her voice still not quite returned to its former strength.

"I think so, yeah."

She looked up at him, head tilted just enough for their eyes to meet above the rim of her shades. – "The roof, lunch break. In private. There are things about us you have to know."

---

*I deliberately chose to not have Rei being part of any denomination. Partly to avoid showing preference for any over the others and partly because while I can do research, I cannot with 100% accuracy get right the rites of any denomination other than my own.*

*The lengthy psychoanalysis in this chapter is meant to shed some light on Rei's new personality. She's nowhere near as tough and invincible as she seems – or to be more exact, she's tough, yes, but she is by no means one-dimensional. The trenchcoat she wears isn't just physical protection: it*
is a shell she wraps around herself. Her behavior at the end of the chapter is what happens if that shell momentarily cracks.

The expression Rei used indeed means 'shut up'. However, it is a sharply impolite and offensive form more akin to 'shut the hell up'; it's not quite profanity, but it's still radically unlike the polite speech register she tends to use (and uses all the time in canon). The very fact that she momentarily uses stronger-than-usual language should be a clue as to just how agitated she is at the time.
"Morning, kid." – Shephard quipped over his cup, watching Kaworu wade into the kitchen. He did raise an eyebrow when he saw the teen's slightly unsteady steps towards the fridge.

"You don't look so good. Coffee?"

"I'll be fine." – Kaworu replied quietly before grabbing a bottle from his liquor stash and promptly downsing the entire thing in one go.

Shephard's eyebrows immediately jumped up to his hairline. – "Whoa, easy there! Did the doc's girl turn you down yesterday or something?"

"It's nothing."

"Then why are you trying to get plastered so early in the morning?"

"I drink this instead of coffee."

And right now, Kaworu really needed something to keep him awake. It wasn't his choice to stay up all night, but he just couldn't sleep.

He tried, though. Yet even after hours of tossing and turning, he couldn't get over Rei's odd behavior... nor that odd surge of familiarity he felt when she hugged him.

"Kid, that bottle is a bit more than a pint, and more than third of that is pure alcohol. Drinking that on an empty stomach is just asking for trouble." – Shephard grabbed one of the bread rolls in arm's reach of him and tossed it at the teen, who narrowly caught it. – "At least grab some chow before you pass out."

"I don't get drunk from this much."

The adult, however, would have none of it. – "No feeding BS to me, I know my way around booze. Eat up."

30 minutes later

He still couldn't get it out of his mind.

At least the cool, late-October air helped clear away his drowsiness somewhat. Even so, he knew that it will likely last only until he actually sits down in class, then he will inevitably fall asleep. He only hoped that the teachers won't take issue with him taking a nap, because he really couldn't help it.

With that said, Kaworu knew that he had to look into getting a coat soon. He didn't know exactly how different Japanese climate was from the European one he was used to, but it seemed like first snowfall wasn't that far off.
In school textbooks, he read that before Second Impact, the seasons weren't quite as extreme as now. It was all because of the Occupation: sometime after they set up shop, the Combine built a giant portal that sucked away a substantial portion of the Earth's oceans to parts unknown. Global sea levels dropped by several meters, exposing uncountable millions of square kilometers of coast. As sand is much more reflective than water, the cumulative effect of the sea level drop increased the Earth's overall albedo ever so slightly. Coupled with the actual loss of who knows how many cubic kilometers of water, surviving climatologists already noticed a change before the Revolution of 2018, yet the full effects only manifested in the early 2020s.

Essentially, Earth was now subjected to what could best be described as a mini ice age. With the increased surface albedo, more sunlight was reflected back into space, cooling the atmosphere – which caused increased snowfall, which in turn increased the albedo even more in a positive feedback loop. Summers weren't especially colder, but winters were downright brutal now. In some isolated valleys in Siberia, nighttime temperatures sometimes dropped as low as three digits in the negative – low enough that one climate research expedition working in the region once found a thin layer of frozen carbon dioxide caked over the snow.

Ironically, the only reason why it didn't get any worse was because the cooling was partly counteracted by what was left of the previous man-made nemesis of nature: global warming. The collapse of industry during the Occupation did wonders at cleaning the planet's atmosphere of contaminants, but the effects wouldn't have disappeared for decades or even centuries... were it not for the new calamity.

Kaworu didn't really like snow, but got used to it. After all, he had no choice in the matter.

At least it wasn't raining now, unlike the last time he walked this same road to school. To him, it felt almost like it happened a whole another life ago, even though he knew he was only bedridden for about a week. Even so, it was the longest hospital stay he ever experienced in his life and to some extent, it was good to be back to normalcy.

Except for Rei's behavior, that is.

Kaworu was so deeply lost in his thoughts that he was mildly startled when Rei's bike unexpectedly stopped next to him, the girl already holding a spare helmet in his direction. – "Get on."

**Tokyo-2, Inner District 5**

*1137 hours*

Nothing was said during their journey to school. Nor when they arrived: Rei simply took the helmet from him without a word and proceeded to completely ignore his existence for the rest of the morning.

She was seemingly back to her usual behavior, except not quite. Something was missing. Kaworu couldn't tell what it was, but the air around her was somehow... different now.

Asuka was already there by the time he arrived. In fact, she was already gone by the time he dragged himself out of bed. He never questioned why the blond picked Hikari of all people to hang around – or maybe it was Mari. However, that latter theory was debunked by Asuka's early departure. As class representative, Hikari took it upon herself to arrive to class before everyone else, as if she was trying to lead by example or something. While Mari didn't go to the trouble of waking up earlier due to her friend's quirk, Asuka did.

Against his expectations, he managed to stay awake during classes. Yet even that time he spent
doing nothing but stare at the back of Rei's head, as if he could somehow guess what thoughts were taking place underneath that unruly blue mop.

Then came the lunch break – the time when she wanted to talk to him, if what she said yesterday was true. Kaworu watched the girl get out from behind her desk and pause a bit.

She sent an almost invisible glance in his direction before walking off towards the classroom's entrance.

Kaworu got her meaning and followed soon after.

So there he was, sitting on the school's roof with his back resting against the stairwell's rear wall.

"So... what did you want to talk about?"

Rei just stared off at the cityscape, as if she didn't hear him. He was about to ask again when she suddenly asked – "What do you remember of your past?"

Kaworu blinked at the sudden question. – "What's this about?"

"I am told you are suffering from a loss of memory. What do you remember?"

"Pretty much nothing." – he replied with a shrug. – "Why?"

In response, Rei merely reached into her coat and pulled out a white, unmarked envelope she tossed onto his lap.

"The answer you are seeking is in there."

Flipping the envelope open, Kaworu found that it only contained a single photo.

When he looked at it however, he felt as if the world suddenly stopped around him for a moment.

Of the two labcoated figures, it was impossible not to recognize a visibly younger Yui as one of them, standing next to a bespectacled man with strong, almost angular, features. But that wasn't what grabbed his attention. It was the three children milling around the adults' legs, barely more than toddlers. One of them was a brown-haired boy Kaworu noted vaguely resembled the male scientist, but the other two he recognized immediately.

A gray-haired boy curiously looking at the camera, with a blue-haired girl shyly peeking out from behind him.

A timestamp in the corner marked the photo as having been taken in 2030, almost exactly 11 years ago.

All the sense of familiarity he felt around her, that he had already known her, made sense now – because he really did meet her before, if the evidence he was holding in his hand was of any indication.

"...I assume you can explain this." – he said after a while.

"I have not looked upon this for years. That is why I did not recognize you sooner." – She sat down next to him, eyes downcast. – "I am an adopted child. Dr. Ikari took me in eight years ago, during her divorce proceedings. The man on the image was her husband."

"And... us?"
"I do not remember that far back, but I do faintly remember one person." – She looked up at the sky. – "When I was very young, I had a twin brother. But he fell ill and was taken away. Once I was old enough to understand the concept, I was told that he died."

She looked at him.

"I know now that you didn't."

"And you think... that I'm your brother?"

"Not think. Know. I would not be telling you this otherwise." – She laid a hand on his arm, where his tattoo was located. – "The Sephirot, Yosher-Upright configuration. Describes God's plan as it unfolds in Creation. Few know what it is, fewer still what it means. Only one person in the entire world has a mark identical to mine."

Of all the things she could've said to him, this was the absolute last one he expected.

He honestly didn't know what to think. That recently emerged part of his mind somehow knew she was telling the truth – even as his common sense, the one that developed during his years on the street and carried him through life, kept insisting that he shouldn't just accept it out of hand. There had to be a catch... there always was a catch.

"What makes you think I am who you think I am?"

"Your mark. Your appearance. Your presence. I feel that I am right."

"That's not much to go on."

"You are reluctant to believe me."

"No shit." – he grumbled. – "You dump this kind of thing on me out of the blue, of course I find it hard to believe. No offense."

"None taken."

"I don't even know what I'm supposed to say."

"Nothing."

"I mean it. I really don't know what to say."

"I know."

"Know what?"

"That you mean it."

Kaworu sighed and looked at the photo again. There was no mistaking it: it was him alright, with Rei hiding behind him from the camera. It was almost cute, even though he genuinely couldn't imagine the girl he knew doing something like that. Right now, he could sooner imagine her shooting the camera than hiding from it.

Then something else occurred to him. – "Who is this?" – he asked, pointing at the third child on the picture.

"Dr. Ikari's biological son. One year older than us. She lost custody of him when she divorced."
"That's why she adopted you?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you remember him?"

"Yes. I was five years old when he left." – She paused. – "He was... a good friend."

"Have you heard about him since?"

"He is no longer on Earth. I do not know his current whereabouts, although I believe he is currently living on Polygonus."

Ever since he came to know her, Kaworu always wondered what exactly made Rei so hostile and distant towards everyone. Now he thought he knew: loss. Losing not one, but two, people close to her. He couldn't see into her head the same way he now knew she could see into his, but he guessed that was the answer. Maybe she didn't want to get close to people so that she wouldn't feel that loss again? Or did she think other people would only cause pain to her? That he didn't know. Not without asking her, anyway.

"Just in case we are really siblings..." – he started to ask.

"We are." – she replied immediately.

"Anyway... do you happen to know who our parents were?"

As he stretched himself, he didn't catch Rei momentarily hesitating before her reply. – "We were not born to anyone I know."

"Worth a try, I guess. Any other sudden family relationships I should know about?"

"No." – She bowed her head. – "I am sorry I cannot help you more."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it."

"If there is anything I can aid you with, let me know."

"Oh, no. You're not indebted to me or anything."

"This is not a debt. I am offering my assistance freely."

"Why?"

"It is said that blood is thicker than water." – The photo suddenly floated off of Kaworu's lap and twirled in the air. – "In our case, it is not just our blood that marks us as different. We are not like the others. Because of that, I am able to help you with things others cannot or would not."

Kaworu almost assured her again that she didn't need to do that – when he remembered a certain conversation from before his injury.

"Well... there is one thing." – he said hesitantly.

"What is it?"

"Some guys asked me about that fight I got into on my first day here."

"That's why she adopted you?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you remember him?"

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"What is it?"

"Some guys asked me about that fight I got into on my first day here."
"Do you want me to neutralize them?"

"Oh, no no no no! It's not like that!" – he said hastily. Chances are, she wasn't kidding with the offer. – "They wanted to talk to me because they've been thinking of forming a group to deal with assholes like those three."

"A vigilante force?" – Rei asked immediately.

"Something like that, yeah. I have no idea where to even start."

"To effectively carry out such activities, you need background infrastructure. Base of operations. Funds."

"If you're thinking of giving me money, don't."

"I am ready to assist."

"No. That's your money, you earned it. I'm not going to mooch off of you."

Rei seemed to pick up on his tone of finality. – "So be it. There are other ways to acquire the funds you need."

"How?"

"I am acquainted with certain... elements in this city."

"What elements?"

"Unlike what the outward appearance suggests, this city has a considerable criminal underworld."

"Gangs, you mean?"

"Not merely gangs. Organized crime. In particular, Tokyo-2 is the primary base of operations for the Yamagishi-gumi, Japan's most powerful yakuza clan. Under their dominion, the city is considered neutral ground by the smaller clans. Many business meetings and conflicts have taken place in the outer districts... sometimes with bloodshed. I advise you to stay clear of them."

Kaworu nodded, mentally filing that piece of information away. – "Okay. Thanks for the warning."

"But I do know a person. One who is able to procure a large amount of money... provided he receives a return on his investment."

He almost immediately read between the lines and realized what she was implying. – "Loan shark?"

Rei nodded. – "There are several in the city, yet he is the only one I would call reliable. I never required his services myself, but his reputation speaks for him; efficiency is his mark, not greed. However, do not make the mistake of underestimating him: like others, he will not tolerate non-payment for any reason."

"You do realize I never dealt with people like those, right?"

"You have no need to. Let me know once you have need of his services and I shall act as your representative."

Kaworu sighed. – "You know you don't have to do that." – he said, even though he already knew the chances of him convincing her were nil. When she said she wanted to help him, she sounded
almost desperate. Pleading.

As if she was silently begging to be of use to him.

"I am not doing it because I have to. I am doing it because I want to."

"You're already helping me. We fought alongside each other, remember?"

Rei unexpectedly leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. – "Indeed."

Kaworu fervently hoped no one happened to come up to the roof and see them. Being in a compromising position in the infirmary was one thing, being in a compromising position in school was a whole another. He'd never hear the end of it from Asuka, that's for sure. Being hounded by jealous fangirls intent on making him "reconsider" was something he really didn't need either.

Especially if the one they mistook as his girlfriend was apparently his closet-cuddlebug sister.

I'm aware how cliché'd the "sudden family relation reveal" trope is, but it will be fully explained later on. I also wanted to nip in the bud any potential thoughts in the audience's heads about Kaworu and Rei being shipped in this story after the previous chapter. They are NOT. 100% not. And it won't change later on. Just so we're clear. I'm not averse to the pairing, but it's definitely not going to happen in this story.

Rei's new attitude towards Kaworu isn't merely as a sibling either. One of my readers once likened her to Trinity from The Matrix; while her appearance is indeed similar, her intended characterization is more like that of a rōnin – a samurai without a master. In samurai culture, a warrior is supposed to take their own life if their master dies; those who refused were discriminated against as cowards and renegades, with the laws of the Edo period even forbidding them from taking up a new master. Many became outlaws and scholars suspect that the roots of the Yakuza lie among the ranks of the rōnin as well.

In canon, Gendo can be said to have fulfilled the position of master for Rei, once we consider how devoted she was to him. This story's Rei never had a master to begin with, which contributed to her developing her current personality – but to some extent, she's still the same: a person with great aptitude and potential, but no direction.

Regarding the Earth's climate change, I found it fitting to distinguish SCE from canon by going in the opposite direction. Surface albedo indeed affects the local climate; snow's high reflectivity is the reason why snow-covered areas are colder.
Kaworu dropped his school bag with a sigh as he kicked off his shoes. As luck would have it, he was the one assigned to clean the classroom today... and as expected, Tōji and Kensuke fled as soon as humanly possible to avoid having to help. Cleaning wasn't his forte, but he managed. After all, if he just plain refused to do something he didn't want to do, he probably would've starved long ago.

What he didn't expect was Rei wordlessly waiting for him at the school gate, long after everyone else had already left. That was a minor blessing, in more ways than one. For one, he didn't have to walk home. For another, cleaning duty took long enough that nobody was around to see her pick him up.

He was still having trouble getting his mind around the fact that he had a sister. Granted, their equally weird (and similar) appearance agreed with the discovery, but still. Then there were her allegations that the two of them were special. Kaworu never considered himself special, even though he was aware that he was stronger and healed much faster than other people. But Rei's claims that he was psychic too... that was stretching things a bit.

A part of his mind morbidly wondered whether Shephard even moved during the day as he walked into the kitchen and saw his senior still sitting at the table. On the very same chair as in the morning, even. Unlike in the morning, though, he was doing paperwork instead of eating.

And if his expression was of any indication, Shephard did not like doing paperwork in the least.

The man briefly raised a hand as greeting when Kaworu passed by him, leaving the teen free to sit down opposite of him and let out another sigh.

"Something on your mind?" – Shephard asked abruptly, without even looking up.

Kaworu had half a mind to deny and leave it at that, but ultimately decided not to. – "Actually... did you ever had something happen that turned your entire world upside down?"

"Honestly? I've seen and lived through shit you wouldn't believe." – Shephard shifted in his seat to resume blood circulation in his legs, pushing the documents he was working on aside with visible relief and distaste. – "How old do you think I am?"

Kaworu looked at his senior's graying blond hair. – "Umm... forty?"

Shephard smirked. – "Sixty five."

"...really?"

"Yeah. I actually had to do paperwork so that the brass didn't send me into retirement."

"You really don't look like it. How come?"

"That's where the part you wouldn't believe comes in." – Shephard sighed. – "It's a long story. Very long. I only ever told one person in the world, and she almost didn't believe me either. Hell, if I hadn't married a scientist, maybe she wouldn't have."
"Asuka's mother?" – Kaworu asked quietly.

"Yep."

"I heard what happened. She was three at the time, right?"

"Two; her birthday's in December. Anyway, considering that I spent two years in an asylum after the Occupation to get my head sorted out and still have nightmares from time to time, you can see why I never told anyone. They would've tossed my ass back there in a heartbeat."

"That bad?"

"Worse than you think. Let me tell you this: only one guy saw what I did and lived to tell the tale. One. People kiss the very ground he walks on now."

Shephard sighed again and leaned back, arms crossed.

"We all have our demons." – he said after a while. – "Some of our own creation, some not. Mine are not, but I had to go through that crap anyway. Same with Asuka. That's just how things are."

"You accepted it?"

"Hell no. But short of traveling back in time, there are some things that can never be fixed." – Shephard motioned towards the window. – "Take this world, for example. How do you suppose things would've gone if Second Impact never happened? I never would've met Kyoko and Asuka wouldn't have been born, for one. Or maybe she would've been born to some other guy and would be a redhead like her mother was."

Kaworu nodded, even though he inwardly found the mental image of Asuka with red hair rather weird. – "I see. Did Asuka get her middle name from her mom?"

"Nope, she got that from Kyoko's dad Albrecht. Kyoko's family name was Soryu, from her mom Matsuko. Asuka's half-German, half-Japanese on her mother's side."

"Did you ever meet them? Your wife's parents, I mean."

"Albrecht died during the Occupation; Overwatch caught wind of him being in cahoots with the resistance. He stayed behind to buy time while the girls made a run for it. I did meet Matsuko, though; strong woman, that one. Even after she got diagnosed with cancer, she still hung on long enough to lead her daughter to the altar."

"Asuka's got good pedigree, then." – Kaworu joked, though inwardly he thought 'I wonder if my parents were like that?'

Shephard chuckled at that. – "Damn right she does."

"Where is she, anyway?"

"Off at one of her friends. By the way, do you have some free time tomorrow?"

"I think so. Why?"

"I asked the doc if the company has a firing range for the security guards. I thought I'd take you and her kid there, see what you can do."

"I've never held a gun in my life."
"I figured that. The way you held your gun in your last battle and hit everything but what you were aiming at kinda clued me in."

"I did hit that thing." – Kaworu retorted, though not quite as confidently as he wanted. His senior was a professional, after all.

"At that range and with automatic fire, it would've been a miracle if you didn't. I'm not training you to be a sniper or anything, but if you can nail someone in the chest from across the street with a pistol, that should be enough."

"Have you ever shot someone?" – the teen blurted out abruptly.

"More than once." – Shephard shrugged. – "Don't ask how many; I was too busy staying alive to keep count." – He suddenly paused, looking thoughtful for a moment. – "Huh... I wonder..."

"What?"

Shephard shook his head dismissively. – "Nothing, forget it. Just something that came to my mind. So yeah, I shot people before."

"What's it like?"

"I can't really say. Probably different for everyone. I mean, it's grilled into us in boot camp that if somebody's trying to kill you, don't hesitate, just shoot the son of a bitch first. If you don't, either you die or your buddy does. Shoot first, feel bad afterwards."

"So you don't have any problems with it?"

Shephard gave him a blank stare. – "Kid, if I took issues with shooting people, do you think I'd be in the military?"

"Good point."

"I'm not a psycho who gets his jollies from killing people, but if I have to kill, I kill. Same way why you sit into a giant monster to fight other giant monsters. It's part of the job." – Shephard then leaned forward and rested his elbows on the kitchen table. – "With that said... after what happened last time, I won't hold it against you if you want out."

"I'm not quitting." – Kaworu said immediately.

"You sure? If it's the doc not letting you, I can make a few calls to... convince her otherwise."

"No, it's not that. I'm just worried that if Re- if Ikari goes up against the next Angel all by herself, she might not be able to handle it."

"She won't." – Tabris assured.

'And if she really is my sister, then I definitely won't let her go alone.' Kaworu mentally added for himself. – "I mean, I might be just getting in the way, but... at least I get in the bad guys' way too, right?"

"Angel?"

Only then did Kaworu realize his slip-up. – "That's, um... that's what I call them. I mean, they're coming from the sky and have halos, so they're a bit like angels."
Shephard just stared at him blankly for about ten seconds before sighing. – "...I really can't see how that comparison works for you, but I don't have anything better to call them, so let's just roll with that. No quits, then?"

"No."

The adult gave Kaworu a nod of respect. – "Then you've got balls of brass, kid. If only we had more guys like you in the force."

"Why?"

Shephard pointed a thumb at himself. – "I'm the exception, not the rule. Hell, I'm pretty sure the only reason why I wasn't hauled away to Muspelheim yet is because I know how to keep my mouth shut."

"It's like that everywhere."

"Yeah, but you civvies don't have commissars standing over your shoulder all the damned time." – The man shook his head and muttered – "I swear, Keel must be breeding those guys..."

"That Muspelheim place, is it a prison or something like that?"

"One of the first systems that got charted way back when they started building the Waygates; 'bout twice as far from Earth as Polygonus. They found five planets, but four were gas giants. The only one that wasn't was this big-ass planet in spitting distance to the star – and I mean literally spitting distance: one year there is something like 18 hours long."

"And they put a prison there?"

"Nah, it's in space. Hiding in the planet's shadow so that it won't get burned, using the solar wind to stay in orbit so that it won't fall down to the planet either. And that's the beauty of the thing: even if you slip outside somehow, you have nowhere to go. Leave the planet's shadow? You'll get incinerated by the star. Have a heat shield? You still die from radiation. Go planetside? It's, like, 2000 degrees on the surface, plus the planet is twice as big as Earth, so it's got some mean gravity. Holiday resort, it ain't."

Shephard flexed his numb arms, one of his shoulders making a slightly audible crack.

"The place is basically a gulag. They stuff it with political prisoners and other people they want to shut up, then work them to death in the local foundry. I don't think anyone ever left that place alive, aside from the guards; those are rotated every once in a while, partly to keep them from being 'poisoned by dissident propaganda' and partly to show them what happens to those who speak up against Keel and his buddies. I never went there myself, but some guys I know did... and they all looked scared shitless when they talked about it."

A thought then occurred to Kaworu. – "If they want to shut those people up so badly, why don't they just kill them?"

"Because that would send the wrong message." – Shephard pointed out. – "If they start killing dissidents, they would be no different than the Combine – and look how that turned out. Granted, at least the Confederacy doesn't go out of their way to make everyone's life difficult just for shits and giggles. Anyway, the closest I ever got to that hellhole was the system's main colony on Sethlans, the fourth planet. Well, on one of the moons. But I hope I'll never have to go back there." – He shook his head. – "Man... I can't believe how the eggheads seriously couldn't put that fucking Waygate any closer. I mean, the ship had to burn its entire fuel supply to get there in any reasonable amount of
time and it still took us *three months* to get to the colony after arriving to the system! Can you believe that?"

"That sounds nasty. It's like having to take a bus trip from here to Africa."

"Scratch bus. Bicycle, more like. Good thing there's a gas giant right next door; plenty of fuel to go around. Between that, the prison's foundries and that the colony is just at the right place from the star to set up greenhouses, they've got a pretty nice setup going on. The navy even set up a shipyard there last year. Lots of tourists, too."

That surprised Kaworu. – "Tourists?"

"Yep. Muspelheim's a binary system; there's another star, a red one, that orbits the bigger, yellow one. That's why the Waygate couldn't be placed any closer: its gravity is messing things up, or something like that. Anyway, it's pretty far away, but... well... you know how strong the full moon shines if the sky's clear at night?"

"Yeah."

"Imagine that in red, lasting for half a year. Bit creepy, but looks really awesome. Add in the light reflected by the gas giant and it's a stargazer's dream."

"I never would've though I'd get **tourist advice** from you, of all people."

Shephard laughed at that. – "Heh. What can I say? I'm a man of surprises."

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*Tokyo-2, Outer District 8*

*Same time*

"So I hear Prince Charming returned to his throne."

"Can we *possibly* have a conversation without you bringing him up *all the frickin' time*?" – Asuka retorted with a scowl as she took the glass Hikari offered her.

"Asuka, why are you being so mean to him?" – the pigtailed girl asked, giving the other glass she was carrying to Mari, who promptly returned to lazing about on the sole bed in Hikari's room, with said room's owner sitting down onto the edge of the bed.

"I'm not mean." – the blond replied, taking a sip while idly swinging her legs under her chair. – "I'm just keeping him at arm's reach, so he won't try anything. It's called preemptive measures."

"And if he wanted to date you, would you do it?"

"I don't even *know* him." – Asuka pointed out.

Mari just grinned. – "No problem. There's this thing called a blind date..."

"I *know* what that is." – Asuka cut her off. – "I'm not going to jump into bed with just any random guy." – She looked at Hikari. – "Would you?"

"Of course not!"

"I don't think she'd jump into bed with anyone." – Mari supplied before her lips twisted into a cat-like smile. – "Except for Suzuhara, that is."
Hikari immediately blushed scarlet red. – "S-stop that!"

"Oooh~, is somebody getting embarrassed? Were you thinking about all the naughty things you could do with him?" – Mari teased the pigtailed girl.

"Stop that! I'm not a... a... sex-friend like you!"

Mari laughed. – "While I'm flattered about your estimation of my prowess in bed, I'll have you know that I'm not as promiscuous as you make me out to be." – She turned to Asuka. – "In other words, don't listen to her."

The blond ran her eyes over her fellow girl's body. – "I don't know. You look like someone who would attract guys like flies."

"If you want to see things for yourself, let me know and we can arrange something. I have an open-door policy."

It was at this point that Asuka silently decided that a very quick change of topic was in order... before she unintentionally did or said something she shouldn't have. – "Those two are definitely up to something."

"What two?" – Mari asked back, eyebrow slightly raised from the sudden swerve.

"Nagisa and Ikari. When he came home from the hospital, she was with him and they went into his room. Didn't even come out for a while."

That drew forth another smile from the bespectacled temptress. – "Ah, you think they dodged in there for a quickie?"

"That's what I thought too, but I couldn't hear anything."

"Well, well, well... eavesdropping, are we?"

"You tell me with a straight face you wouldn't eavesdrop if a couple was fucking next door!" – Asuka retorted with complete seriousness.

"Asuka!" – Hikari reprimanded, though her cheeks visibly colored a bit as she took a sip from her glass.

"Oh, I wouldn't. Eavesdrop, that is." – Mari replied, stretching herself with a groan before dropping the bombshell. – "I'd join them in a threesome."

Even while in the middle of furiously trying to nuke that mental image out of her hormonal teenage brain for the moment, Asuka almost guffawed at the rather interesting choking sound Hikari made. That is, before Hikari started coughing and gasping for breath, slamming her glass down to the bedside counter to avoid spilling its remaining contents while her free hand balled into a fist and repeatedly beat on her own chest.

Mari immediately reached up and gave her friend a powerful slap to the back that echoed across the room like the crack of a whip. For her part, Hikari stopped coughing, supporting herself on her knees as she struggled to get her breathing back under control.

"You good?" – Mari asked, pushing herself up to her elbow.

Hikari just nodded and flashed a thumbs-up.
"So... I'm guessing you'd do it with a girl too?" – Asuka quipped, mentally noting Mari's well-toned arms – something she didn't notice before.

"In a heartbeat." – Mari replied immediately, dropping herself back down to the bed. – "Not being picky means more opportunities."

Asuka then turned to Hikari. – "And since you're friends, I'm also guessing that you're okay with this."

"She's not interested, so I'm not bothering her." – Mari added.

"Which I'm grateful about." – Hikari grumbled, releasing another cough to clear the raspiness from the throat.

"Does it really matter who pops your cherry? If you wanna do it, just get it over with. You won't fret about it anymore afterwards."

"Did you do it?" – Asuka challenged Mari, who just smirked mysteriously.

"Now that would be telling. What about you? I'm not stupid enough to think you brought this up without a reason or not notice how calm you are about the whole thing. You've got the hots for girls too, don't you?"

Asuka recoiled away, a hasty denial already on her lips. Yet the way the other girl was looking at her knowingly told her that her secret was up. – "Okay, I admit: I'm guilty as charged." – Asuka said finally, cheeks coloring at Mari's victorious chuckle.

"I knew it."

"And here I thought I wasn't the only sane person here." – Hikari interjected in a mock-disappointed tone.

"Hey, hey. Now that wasn't very nice." – Mari admonished.

"Sorry."

"What's up, sis? Not enough normalcy for you?"

The trio all looked up at the older girl leaning against the doorway. Asuka silently noted that, if she would've had twintails, she would've looked rather similar to Hikari.

"Didn't know you were at home, Kodama." – Mari said, sitting up.

"Because it's too quiet? That's what happens when Nozomi's not at home."

"Weee-ll, you could always bring your boyfriend home if you want a bit more noise." – Mari remarked in jest.

The elder Horaki laughed. – "Oh, come on. Do you really think I would be that cruel to poor Hikari?"

"S- STOP TEASING ME!"

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Muspelheim – named after the realm of fire in Norse mythology – is supposed to be the real-life star system of 55 Cancri, located 12.3 parsecs from Earth in the Cancer constellation. It is indeed
a binary system, composed of a G8V yellow dwarf (smaller and fainter than the Sun) and a smaller red dwarf over a thousand astronomical units from the yellow one; from what I can gather, astronomers are having trouble determining its exact distance and suspect that it might actually be two red dwarfs gravitationally bound to each other and the yellow star into a trinary system.

Thanks to a detailed explanation video by Youtube user Scott Manley, I now know how this all works. Under normal circumstances, two stars being in close proximity – either by one star passing through the other's gravitational sphere of influence or by the two orbiting each other – results in a gravitational tug-of-war that destabilizes the orbits of all smaller bodies in the system, ultimately ejecting them from the system altogether via repeated gravitational slingshots. In the case of 55 Cancri, the reason why there is a stable planetary system orbiting the yellow star is because the red star is too small and too far away to yank the planets out of orbit.
Chapter 22

Geofront, AEL Headquarters
October 26, 2041
1226 hours

"This isn't the first time I've been down here, but damn if this view isn't awesome." – Shephard remarked, glancing at the forest below them as the car glided down one of the roads spiraling around the Geofront's inner circumference, from the top of the cavern to the bottom. These were actually the main transit lines down into the Geofront, requiring only a car and about an hour's worth of driving at highway speeds. Beelining via elevators might have been faster and cost less in the way of battery charge, but elevators required power and were subject to gravity in case of a malfunction.

Granted, it wasn't like they didn't have safety mechanisms in case of a blackout, but most people would understandably be nervous about being suspended several kilometers above the ground, with no way up or down.

The man only took his eyes off the way he was going to spare a look at the rearview mirror's reflection of the two teens sitting behind him. – "What do you think?"

Kaworu shrugged. Rei, as usual, remained silent.

Shephard sighed. – "Not feeling talkative, I see. Still in a bad mood that she turned you down?"

_That_ got a reaction. – "She didn't! / I did not." – the two answered simultaneously, which got a snicker from Shephard.

"Cool it, I'm just pulling your leg."

Kaworu shook his head in mild annoyance. Having to hear the same from Asuka was bad enough, but it seemed like the apple didn't fall far from the tree. In fact, Shephard ironically seemed less mature than his daughter. Living together with a good-humored person wasn't unwelcome, but the man seemed to have an innate skill to frustrate others for his amusement; Kaworu believed he once heard Kensuke referring to such people as 'trolls'... not that he knew where did that term come from.

With that said, Kaworu also remembered the haunted look in Shephard's eyes from that time in the kitchen. Eyes that told a much different story than that of a jovial guy without a care in the world.

Attention jolting back to the present, Kaworu looked at the rearview mirror, but Shephard was minding the road once again. He was about to dismiss that he thought he heard something from him, when he heard it again. Only it wasn't coming from the adult.

It was Rei, eyes closed but lips moving. Kaworu initially though she was trying to say something, but quickly realized she wasn't addressing anyone in particular. She was whispering indeed, her lip movements occasionally gaining a quiet tone as if she was trying to whisper and sing at the same time.

"I bring truth and understanding to your darkest fears... ascension to your destiny is drawing near... taste the wrath of my swift sword, legion of the night... immortals come to rule the earth on beams of light."

Twenty minutes later, Kaworu was mildly vindicated for the earlier ribbing when Shephard literally walked into Hyuga, almost knocking the smaller man over.
"E-excuse me, sir!" – the tech apologized, pushing his crooked glasses back into place.

"Nah, I wasn't looking where I was going. Sorry. Going somewhere?"

"No, no, I was just... delivering some reports."

"Sounds familiar. With all this tech around, you'd think paperwork is a thing of the past." – Shephard joked.

Hyuga nervously nodded. – "Seems like some things never change."

"Like you being scared of me?"

"I'm not scared! I'm just... you know... government official looking for things to ruin our day with? No offense." – he added quickly.

"None taken, I hear you." – Shephard leaned in conspiratorially and lowered his voice. – "Fucking commissars are a pain in the ass. And you didn't hear that from me."

"O-of course." – Hyuga replied uncertainly, slightly caught off-guard by the shockingly straightforward statement. – "To be honest, you're not quite what I expected."

"What did you expect, then?"

"I don't know... I guess... I thought you'd be more serious."

"Like?"

"Yes, sir! No, sir! Can't have any fun with a stick up my ass, sir! Something like that."

Several people nearby turned around in surprise at Shephard's sudden laughter rippling down the corridor.

Even Kaworu's mouth curled up into a smile, until he realized Hyuga was addressing him now. – "By the way, Nagisa-kun... did you have anything to do with Adam being so busy lately?"

"I... don't think so. Why?"

"There's a lot of network activity between him and external nodes. His core is also giving off an active reading all the time. I traced some of his connections, and... well, for lack of a better term, he's reading."

By this time, Shephard has gotten his mirth back under control and was paying attention once more. – "Reading? As in, reading books?"

"Digital ones, yes."

"Maybe he's just bored."

Hyuga shrugged, his earlier nervousness gone, now that he was in home field. – "Could be, but the sheer number of books he's going through is unusual. I mean, over a dozen per hour. And after reading each one, he locks out external debugger access for a few minutes, so we can't tell what he's doing. He even rebooted himself a few times."

"Did you ask him?"
"We did. Said he's 'optimizing' and when we asked why, he said because Nagisa told him to."

Everyone present looked at Kaworu, who visibly squirmed under the sudden attention. – "I didn't say anything like that."

"So the kid's ride doesn't work right now?" – Shephard asked, turning back to Hyuga.

"The prototypes have an emergency diagnostic bypass that allows us to manually control the neural interface from the control room, so we can still make it work if we have to. But it's nowhere near as effective and the final mass-production version will drop this function because it presents a point of vulnerability against cyberwarfare attacks."

"You mean a hacker could exploit it?"

"Possibly. The bypass is implemented as a non-maskable hardware interrupt, so the AI cannot countermand the order."

That last part was the only part Shephard understood. – "No giant robot uprising, then?"

"That's not possible. The core of an Evangelion is physically separated from the nervous system, so the AI is unable to take control. It can override system settings to prevent unauthorized personnel from syncing, but that's about all it can do."

"And if you connect the core to the nervous system? Can an Evangelion move by itself in that case?"

Hyuga shrugged again. – "I don't know. We never tried. But even if we were to do that, controlling a motor and controlling a muscle are entirely different things. Then there's the fact that AIs are designed for digital input and output. It's likely that, to an AI, full sensory input from an organic body would be too... alien."

"But you have the pilot wired to it when it's deployed. What about that?"

"We didn't want to risk anything unexpected happening, so we isolate the AI from the pilot too. What the neural interface picks up is loaded into a cache, from where the actual useful data is sorted out and sent ahead on the fly, while the rest is deallocated back into the heap as garbage data. Without using a cache, the interface picking up every physiological reaction in the pilot's brain caused by emotions, thoughts, etc. and feeding it to the AI would cause the AI to develop a memory leak and crash after a while, so we'd have to reboot and debug the OS every few days."

"You realize I didn't understand most of that."

"The cache allows the AI to dynamically adjust the neural interface to the pilot." – Rei spoke up suddenly, attracting everyone's attention. – "This assisted synchronization has a higher degree of flexibility than a forced one. Automating subsystem micromanagement also frees up additional computational capacity for executing complex maneuvers. More efficient, less mentally taxing on the pilot."

"Now I get it, since you put it that way. Did you get that too?" – Shephard asked, directing the question at Kaworu. Upon seeing the teen's nod, he turned back to Hyuga. – "See? He understood that too. You just need to put it in a simpler way."

"Sorry."
"No problem. Not everyone here is a scientist." – Shephard paused. – "Well, everyone but me."

"And me." – Kaworu added.

"Right."

"So, here we are."

Kaworu looked around, noting that the firing range wasn't quite as big as he imagined. Considering that every single security guard he'd seen in the facility so far were posted indoors, it made sense. – "Is it really okay for us to be here?"

Shephard shrugged. – "Doc said so. We do have a slight bit of a problem, though."

"What?"

The adult walked to a metal table sitting in the corner and put down the bag that was slugged over his shoulder until now. Reaching inside, he first withdrew a small box, deftly working the combination lock on it before flipping the lid over, revealing a pistol nestled in a well-cushioned interior. He then reached into the bag again and retrieved a handful of ammo magazines.

"Since you two aren't part of security, you're not cleared to use their guns. So I brought my sidearm." – He made a groan of disgust. – "You wouldn't believe the number of forms and permits I had to fill out to be able to bring this in here. I know, security's doing its job, but still. It's ridiculous."

"You really don't like paperwork, do you?"

"It's hell's tinder." – the man replied simply. – "Anyway, I only have one, so you're gonna have to take turns."

"It will not be necessary." – Rei spoke up for the first time, reaching into her coat and pulling out a large revolver. – "I have my own armaments."

Shephard glanced at the weapon skeptically. – "Really now... let me take a look at that."

He already felt the weight when Rei handed the pistol over but one close-in glance was enough for the military officer to confirm that the weapon in his hand was very much a genuine one. The small seams where the parts fitted together, the manufacturer's engravings below the cylinder, it was all too detailed to be fake. Opening up the cylinder was the last proof he needed, as a fake gun would have no need to be loaded with live ammunition. And quite large ammunition, at that.

Kaworu did not understand a single word of the exchange that followed.

"I don't recognize this caliber. What is it loaded with?"

"This weapon's original chassis is that of a Mateba Grifone, carbine version of the Mateba Model 6 Unica recoil-operated semi-automatic revolver, Hunter variant. I had it converted back into a revolver."

"You had a revolver converted into a carbine converted back into a revolver?"

"Yes."

"Why? You could've just bought the revolver version."
"The Model 6 is not available with a barrel of this caliber."

"What, is it chambered for a rifle round or something?"

".454 Casull. It is also capable of chambering the .45 Colt cartridge. The largest cartridge available for the original is .44 Remington Magnum. I also possess a conversion kit for field-converting it back into a carbine, as well as an ACOG scope attachment, to form a compact, medium-range, semi-automatic marksman rifle."

"What do you need a semi-auto rifle for? Are you hunting bullsquids in your free time, or something?"

Rei didn't answer.

"But you know your guns, I'll give you that." – Shephard looked over the weapon again and pointed at the cylinder. – "And what about this? I've never seen a revolver that shoots from the bottom barrel before."

"It dampens recoil by moving the axis of the recoil force closer to the weapon's center of mass, thereby reducing the amount of torque exerted on the shooter's hand."

"Nice. With bullets like these, I'd say that comes in handy. Any other surprises in that coat of yours?"

Again, Rei didn't answer. Instead, she pulled out another revolver identical to the first and placed it on the table.

Then she discarded a pair of Micro Uzis from shoulder holsters... 
...eight magazines of 9x19 mm Parabellum ammo...
...four drum magazines of the same...
...over a dozen speedloaders for the revolver...
...a couple of combat knives from her belt...
...a dozen more knives from the coat...
...three knives from each sleeve...
...two knives from each boot...
...a second belt full of throwing knives...
...a wakizashi she pulled out from behind her waist...
...four collapsible shurikens...
...two chakrams...
...several ten-round box magazines...
...a device that looked like a pistol with a very wide barrel...
...several small cylinders that looked like oversized bullets...

Kaworu just mutely looked back and forth between a blank-faced Rei and a wide-eyed Shephard as
the small arsenal piled up on the table.

Shephard was the one who broke the silence, nearly half a minute after the girl finished unloading. – "I have no damn idea how did you hide all these. The knives, are already pushing it. The guns, even more so. The sword is simply crazy."

He pointed at the pistol-like device and the cylinders next to it.

"But a freaking grenade launcher? What the hell do you need all this heat for?"

"Personal defense." – Rei replied simply.

"There's enough firepower right here to massacre an entire office building's worth of people!"

"This is not all of it."

"...what."

"This is only what I carry on my person at all times. I am unable to concealed-carry all of my armaments at the same time."

"You mean there's more?"

Rei lifted the case she's been carrying the whole time. Kaworu first noticed it when the three of them got into the car topside, but silently decided not to ask. – "I require time to assemble this. You may wish to familiarize him with weapon operation until I am finished." – With that, she turned her back to the other two, put the case down onto the table and started working.

Shephard just looked at her back in disbelief before sighing. – "You've got one hell of a gun-crazy girlfriend, kid."

"She's not my girlfriend!" – Kaworu replied indignantly.

"Anyway... what do you know about gun handling?"

While the two chattered behind her, Rei's mind was working. Not just on assembling her weapon, but also on her thoughts.

'The more things change, the more they stay the same.' she mused. 'Ever since I was a child, I was always alone. In a sense, I still am. He doesn't know who we are, he doesn't know where we came from. He doesn't know anything. Yet at the same time, he is alone as well. He doesn't say it, but I can see it all the same: he can't find his place in this world. He smiles when he talks to his friends but I can always feel uneasiness in him. He feels like an outsider, looking for something he cannot find in others.'

She screwed the rifle's barrel into the frame.

'I have to help him. I can't let him lose his hope and his humanity. I can't let him become like me.'

The rifle's stock slotted into place.

'I have a responsibility now. To protect not just myself, but him as well. I will not allow any harm to come to him.'

Rei paused in the assembly to glance behind herself, at Kaworu trying to follow Shephard's instructions with the gun.
'I don't know what the future will hold... but I do know one thing. Ten years ago, someone took him from me. I don't know who, but someone did.'

Her expression hardened.

'I will not let that happen again. I don't care how many people get in my way; nobody is taking him away from me this time. I won't go through that ever again.'

Rei looked over the assembled rifle one last time to double-check her work.

'Anyone who tries to get between us...'

She loaded a box magazine and cocked the rifle before briefly glancing down the scope.

'...will die.'

Behind her, a sharp crack announced Kaworu firing his first shot.

"Whoa... I didn't know it's got a kick this strong. Can it break my wrist if I hold it wrong?"

"Nah, but it's going to hurt like a bitch all the same. You'll get used to it. Wanna try again?"

Rei looked on with a critical eye as Kaworu took aim and let off another shot. 'His lack of skill isn't faked. I will have to teach him.'

After his third shot, Kaworu lowered his weapon and Shephard opened his mouth to say something... but he didn't get the chance to do so before a very loud report boomed across the room, startling both of them. Shephard even hunched down on instinct, head snapping in the direction of the sound his military training instinctively recognized as high-caliber rifle fire.

In fact, it sounded bizarrely like the very caliber he almost got his head blown off by once, when his old drill sergeant decided that the best way to encourage his recruits into keeping their heads down while crawling through an obstacle course was to fire up a trio of .50cal machine guns with live ammo. – "What the f-?!"

Rei lowered her rifle, her keen eye confirming to her inner satisfaction that she hit Kaworu's target dead-center with her snapshot.

"What the hell was that?" – Shephard demanded, waving away the rifle's muzzle smoke. – "Little warning next time?"

"I was not aiming at either of you."

"Considering we're all still alive, I kinda figured. That didn't sound like a peashooter. What the hell is that thing, an elephant gun?"

"It is an anti-materiel rifle."

"An anti-mat-...? Gimme that!"

Rei instantly snatched the rifle away from him. – "Mine."

"That is not a toy!"

"I know."
"Kid, I know what I heard! That's no civilian hunting rifle, that's a military-grade weapon! Where did you get that?!"

"Irrelevant."

"Like hell it is! Your mom will have my ass on a platter if she finds out you smuggled something like that into the facility!"

"Will she find out?"

"Not from me!" – Kaworu said quickly.

It was barely there, but Rei acknowledged him with a tiny nod of thanks. – "I am already proficient in the handling of firearms. I believed a demonstration was necessary."

"By shooting past my head? If you really are a pro, then you would know that you don't point a gun in the general direction of someone you don't want to shoot! That's gun safety 101!" – Shephard insisted, still a bit pale.

"I was not aiming at either of you." – Rei repeated.

"That doesn't matter! You just don't!"

"If I was intent on killing you, I would not have missed at this range."

"Have you ever shot at someone?"

"Yes."

The blunt reply immediately pulled the wind out of the adult's sails. – "Really?"

Rei nodded. – "The target had recently committed sexual assault. Killshot to the upper chest, range 200 meters, elevation +20 meters. Direct hit to the heart and spine. Zero chance of survival. Police investigation ruled gang showdown." – she listed off tonelessly, without the slightest hint of emotion.

"...are you a vigilante or something?"

"No. He was a target of opportunity." – Glancing down at her weapon, Rei wiped a smudge off of the side of the barrel with her thumb. – "In any case, I do not need to be taught."

"Then why are you even here?" – Shephard asked, spreading his arms to the sides in not entirely faked exasperation.

"Because there is no such thing as enough practice."

"That we can agree on. Let's see what you've got."

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Hyuga's explanation about the override function will probably fly over most readers' heads - but, since I'm studying computer engineering in university, I can explain. As a CPU generally can't afford to idle around waiting for hardware operations to finish, the way modern computer architectures (the x86 in particular) work is that the CPU just gives the order, then does its own thing in the meantime. Once the hardware finishes, it raises an interrupt request as a way of saying "yo, I'm done, pay attention to me", which causes the CPU to pause its current operation, handle the request, then resume whatever it was doing. Software can also raise interrupts,
although those are usually system calls petitioning the OS for access to a system resource. Most interrupts are maskable, meaning that they have a priority rating; the CPU can ignore a new interrupt if it has a lower priority than the one currently executing and pause execution of the current interrupt if it receives a higher-priority one in the meantime, with the lower-priority interrupt going into a queue and executing when the CPU gets around to it. A non-maskable interrupt, on the other hand, cannot be ignored: it demands immediate attention and causes the CPU to drop whatever it’s doing to handle the interrupt before everything else. Therefore, the override’s implementation is analogous to a computer CPU having an extra pin to access its internal workings directly, without the operating system having any say in it.

The override function is functionally the same as the canon Evas’ MAGI uplink. With this universe having access to computational technology advanced enough to allow the existence of artificial general intelligence, the Evas here do not require external computational support to operate, plus vital dependence on ground control in a military weapon would be a hindrance. Aside from limiting operational range, it would also be vulnerable to jamming, someone listening in, or - as those of you who watched Battlestar Galactica can attest - hacking.

The Mateba is an existing weapon of Italian manufacture, designed and built in the late nineties; in this universe, only a very small number was produced just before Second Impact, making it a highly rare collector's item. Unlike common revolvers, it doesn’t have a hammer but uses the recoil force from firing it to cock itself and turn the cylinder. While it is available in multiple calibers, the .454 Casull is the largest of them all, with each bullet being just slightly smaller than an AA battery; with this cartridge, the Mateba is suitable for big game hunting and bear defense, comparable to the famous Desert Eagle in terms of power. As a bit of interesting trivia, the Mateba is what Vash the Stampede's iconic weapon was based upon, though that one was chambered for .45 Long Colt (which the Casull is backwards-compatible with).

It may not be evident, but my primary inspiration for Shephard's personality and physical appearance was Richard Dean Anderson's excellent performance as Jack O'Neill, with a smidgen of Ben Browder alias John Crichton thrown into his personality as well.
For Kaworu, things seemed to have returned to normalcy for now: the monotony of school, Tōji's antics, Asuka's jabs, all the usual. Pretty much the only thing that wasn't usual was Rei constantly hovering around him, following him everywhere like a hired bodyguard. Kaworu suspected that's exactly what she was doing, minus the 'hired' part. It was an interesting reversal of the 'big brother protects younger sibling' formula – as Rei conceded seniority to him without him even asking –, but he had no intention of complaining.

To some extent, Kaworu appreciated the company, even though he still wasn't completely used to it. On the other hand, normalcy now also included the hour-long sync tests at the AEL. Kaworu sometimes wondered whether he would even enjoy them if they weren't so damn boring. And he had a lingering suspicion Rei thought the same way, if the earphones plugged into her ears during every session were of any indication. He couldn't follow suit, however, for the simple reason that he didn't have a music player... and even if he did, he wouldn't know what to put on it and where to acquire it. A lifetime of poverty wasn't exactly conducive to forming a musical taste, after all.

And if there was anything he disliked almost as much as the boredom when it came to sync tests, it was getting the LCL's scent out of his body. Which usually took about half an hour of thorough scrubbing under the employee locker room's showers.

"It’s just my luck that they’d use something that stinks so much..." – he grumbled, reaching for the shower gel for the third time.

"Why are you so concerned about how you smell?" – Tabris asked. – "Your species' sense of smell is not even that sophisticated."

"So? I still smell like I came out of a slaughterhouse."

At least whatever happened didn't affect his ability to synchronize. Kaworu did not want to find out whether Yui would make good on her threat of making him disappear in order to shut him up.

To the boy, it felt like it happened a whole lifetime ago that he got caught up in everything. He had no illusions that he was in control of events in any way – and more than once he found himself questioning whether he wasn't in over his head. Especially after his head almost got fried inside out for real.

The next moment, his head felt like it was stabbed through by a white-hot spike of pure agony.
The ground itself was mostly flat, with a few hills strategically placed to lead groundwater into the lake next to the pyramidal main facility. Once every month, the lake was tapped by giant pumps, forcing the water through a massive sprinkler system mounted onto the Geofront's inner wall to produce artificial rain.

With a mirror system providing light from the surface, the presence of vastly more plant life than humans, coupled with the general lack of herbivorous animals eating the vegetation, made the Geofront almost completely self-sustaining in terms of an oxygen supply. In fact, the cavern sometimes had to be ventilated to keep oxygen levels constant, although it wasn't easy. The cavern's sheer depth underground meant that, if it wasn't hermetically sealed off from the surface, air pressure at the bottom would be significantly higher than in the city's ground level. As it is, the Geofront's ground level air pressure was already higher than sea level, albeit not by much; just enough for the personnel elevators and vehicle access tunnels to double as low-level hyperbaric chambers under the MAGI's control, to eliminate any possibility of decompression sickness while exiting the facility.

This served the AEL's purposes just fine. With the Geofront's overall interior air pressure being lower than it should be, any leaks and ventilation system malfunctions would result in air flowing inwards, preventing the escape of airborne contaminants in case of a containment break. That is, if those contaminants would even be capable of surviving the thin air at the tip of the cavern, comparable to that found on the tallest of Earth's mountains.

The AEL was, after all, a biological research firm with a wide research portfolio. Like many other similar companies, part of that portfolio was finding ways to undo the ecological damage wrought upon the planet. Second Impact introduced a number of invasive species into Earth's ecosystem that flourished in the comparatively mild environment, driving hundreds of indigenous species into extinction and endangering thousands of others in a mass extinction event not seen since the end of the Permian age. Not every species was adversely affected by the newcomers, however; bullsquids rarely wandered far from rivers and swamps while houndeye packs usually roamed the steppes and savannas. Terrestrial life in more remote areas was barely affected and sometimes even flourished, with the forced mass-relocation of humans into larger urban centers by the Combine allowing nature to reclaim many formerly inhabited areas. The new lifeforms also settled into the food chain, with the introduction of headcrabs as easily caught prey benefiting some larger carnivores and omnivores... but not all. Those living near Far Eastern forests quickly learned that the only thing worse than the parasite itself is when it latches onto a black bear.

The AEL briefly became the center of public attention in 2037 when their scientists successfully engineered a gene-modified strain of fungi that produces a modified version of the BTX-C1 botulinum toxin. While the new chemical is harmless to a wide range of high-level life, it is extremely lethal to headcrabs: aside from paralyzing the creature to make it unable to attach firmly to the host, the fast-acting neurotoxin is capable of killing the parasite before it can begin the victim's gruesome biological assimilation. After extensive testing, the toxin was mass-produced and introduced as a highly effective vaccine against headcrab infection. Thanks to this, the reported number of deaths by headcrab dropped sharply, with the would-be victims surviving with "merely" a severe cranial fracture 95% of the time.

Naturally, Yui took it seriously to convince the project leaders to find a formula that's harmless to Vortigaunts. Biochemical barriers between humans and Vorts were discovered to be not serious enough to prevent the two races from digesting each other's foodstuffs (with a few exceptions like Vortigaunts having an allergic reaction to lactose), though they do have slightly different nutritional requirements due to anatomical and biochemical differences. Of course, that doesn't account for the difference in tastes the two species have: to a human, headcrab meat is somewhat bitter but edible, while antlion flesh is outright repulsive. At the same time, Vortigaunts frequently consume the former and actively farm the latter for food and various organic materials, even as the humans painstakingly...
tried to abuse the antlions' tendency to hibernate during winter to exterminate them.

While quite large, the lake in the Geofront lacked both the volume and the depth to support a larger ecosystem. Terrestrial saltwater marine life became all but extinct with the introduction of Xenian leeches that took advantage of the warm temperatures around the tropics to breed to the billions, swiftly consuming anything not protected by a carapace. Luckily, the critters, once adapted to saltwater, couldn't survive in fresh water anymore, which kept most of the rivers and lakes clean - that is, whenever the several-meter drop in global ocean levels didn't prevent the leeches from swimming up the now shallow estuaries. Still, the AEL explored the possibility of eliminating the infestation by chemically mass-sterilizing the leeches, until they realized that with the disappearance of pretty much everything else, the leeches became part of the food cycle for certain bird species as well as supplemental foodstuff for coastal settlements.

Rei knew most of these, even though it wasn't part of her job. All she really needed to concern herself with was the Evangelions, but that didn't mean she was unaware of the world's state at large. She knew a great many things people didn't expect her to... and not all of it was something as innocent as public knowledge.

Part of her knowledge included a general layout of the Geofront's ground level. As employee, she had free passage on this level, so nobody bat an eye at her coming and going whenever she felt like. Especially since she was the big boss' daughter, whom nobody wanted to be caught heckling. Not that Rei would be incapable of defending herself if that happened; far from it.

Thus, nobody was present at the clearing roughly a kilometer from the AEL's pyramid. Rei had the clearing all to herself, and she was putting it to good use. Trenchcoat hung onto a nearby branch, she wore only her sweater and jeans, although if anyone would've seen her, they might have had trouble telling exactly what the vaguely feminine figure was wearing.

Rei was on the move. Like the whirring of some machine, the clearing was abuzz with the whistling sound of her sword cleaving the air at high speed. Her arms barely more than a blur, the girl relentlessly attacked the air with blinding speed, twisting and turning, slashing and stabbing, the improvised *kata* alternating between one-handed and two-handed on the fly. Rei never expected to ever go up against someone else skilled with the sword, what with living in the age of firearms. However, that didn't mean she wouldn't be prepared for it.

Over the years, Rei studied many forms of swordfighting: short sword, long sword, kenjutsu, even fencing. While she could learn and mimic the various forms and styles, it still wasn't enough. Rei felt like her hands were tied, that she couldn't unleash everything she had due to some unseen limitations. It took her a long time until she finally realized what those limitations were: the limitations themselves. Modern fighting styles were designed around duels, involving rules and guidelines to minimize accidental risks to either party. She wasn't seeking to duel on equal grounds; she was looking to gain the upper hand as fast as possible and steamroll her enemy into the ground. It was like the difference between boxing and Krav Maga (which she was thinking of introducing Kaworu to).

So she drew upon what she saw in other styles to design her own style, combining the extended reach of the sword with the speed of eskrima and the fluidity of capoeira.

If a professional swordfighting instructor would've seen her, they would've dismissed her as unnecessary flashy and no doubt self-taught from action movies. But what differentiated Rei from others is that she had the speed and strength to back her style up and turn visually impressive blows with insufficient power behind them into terrifyingly deadly attacks. No matter what kind of martial skill one considered, literally inhuman muscle power and reaction times translated into combat
prowess above and beyond human limits. In fact, Rei had doubts any ordinary human would be capable of successfully imitating her with a real sword.

Launching a high roundhouse kick into the air, Rei used the momentum to slam her foot into the ground and launch herself airborne with the same movement, nimbly twisting her body to slash below her before landing ten meters away. Without pausing for even a split second, she stabbed her blade forward before, in a single movement, stepping forward and turning around to put her entire weight behind a two-handed reverse slash diagonally upwards. Any single one of these attacks would kill and Rei knew it. She existed to crush her enemies, to see them laid out before her and carry in her heart the lamentations of their families.

That was all she was good for.

Lowering her blade, Rei released a small sigh she was holding. Strong as she was, her endurance still had limits.

A second later, her head snapped towards the pyramid in the distance.

Low Earth orbit
Same time

"Report!"

"Contact at five klicks, dead ahead!"

"Five klicks? Why the hell did you wait until now to sound the proximity alarm?!"

"It came out of nowhere! No approach, just popped into existence right on top of us! All gravimetric arrays simultaneously shorted out the instant it appeared, so we only got radar, IR and visual."

"Trasmit IFF challenge!"

"Already did, no response. No radio emissions whatsoever."

"Carthago confirms contact being non-responsive and is calling a battlegroup-wide general quarters. We have green light to engage."

Outside, a frigate's anti-aircraft guns came to life, its starboard and top batteries spitting a hailstorm of proximity-fused fragmentation shells while the ship turned to bring its portside and bottom batteries to bear. It never had the chance to do that, however, before a beam of light lanced out from the void of space and swept over the vessel in a split second, the guns dying down instantly before a series of explosions was followed by the ship literally drifting apart in two diagonally-bisected halves.

Slowly the rest of the carrier group started to move, gun batteries turning to fire and missile launch tubes opening up. The lone carrier in the middle of the formation immediately took cover behind the large, flat bulk of a battlecruiser, the 968-meter behemoth ponderously turning into a broadside position to physically shield the flagship with its own, thicker armor. Around them, the carrier group's two destroyers fired a hasty retro-burn to hang back while what was left of the frigate complement scattered in a loose formation to provide three-dimensional anti-aircraft cover. It was a classic formation, designed to take advantage of each ship class' individual strengths and cover their weaknesses... but not against this opponent.

Ahead of them, the deep blue octahedron's entire bulk shifted in a manner impossible for a solid object, morphing into a five-pointed starfish shape that further split open in the middle to reveal a red
orb. Incandescent light drew into the middle, building up into an almost ethereal glow before a massive beam erupted from the focal point. All crew in the carrier group who happened to be looking out a window at the time could do nothing but watch as the painfully bright beam crossed the distance in barely more than a second and hit the battlecruiser dead on, erupting on the other side with barely any pause to core through the carrier.

The battlecruiser, critically damaged but not dead, nevertheless let off a salvo from its main guns that, had the fight taken place in atmosphere, would have thundered like the wrath of an angry god. However, its quarry shifted back into an octahedral shape at the same time and the rounds abruptly detonated against an octagonal wall. Then the entity returned fire, the focused beam cutting through the wounded titan's armor with ease to rip open two containment vessels deep inside the aft section. Those who were unfortunate enough to be nearby were vaporized near instantly by the hot plasma erupting from two of the battlecruiser's four zero-point catalyzed nuclear fusion reactors, surging through whatever nooks and corridors they could and melting through whatever they couldn't. At the same time, the beam reached the ammunition stockpiles of the two heavy gun turrets above the reactors. Engines sputtering and dying from a sudden lack of critical components, the massive ammunition explosion caused the battlecruiser to drift out of control a moment before the next beam found the other two reactors in the bow and the other two turrets above them, to deadly effect.

What was left of the carrier, a mangled, mostly unrecognizable mess, soon found itself company in the form of the wrecked battlecruiser crashing into it. And the debris from that collision too found company in the form of more debris as the other ships in the carrier group were obliterated one by one.

One of the few bomber pilots who managed to launch before the carrier went down opened his mouth to yell out a command to the scant few wingmates he had, but never managed to make a single sound before his VTOL craft was speared through by an energy beam from the left. As if on cue, a flurry of identical beams erupted from every direction at once, each finding a different target, each a lethal blow. Only one pilot managed to catch movement from the corner of his eye, that of a small, blue shard-like object, before said object spat a beam through his body and made sure he wouldn't live to tell the tale.

In the void, the blue octahedron dipped below the fleet-turned-debris-cloud, soon wrapped in the red glow of atmospheric reentry.

Kaworu felt like he was in hell.

He still faintly remembered the weird, almost headache-like pressure he felt around Sachiel. He felt the same around Shamshel too, but it seemed to lessen while he was inside an Evangelion for some reason. Now, it was back – and it was a million times worse.

It was an indescribably powerful sense of wrongness; he could not describe it any other way. It was as if a gigantic spear made of acid-coated liquid nitrogen was shoved through his entire body, from head to toe. Chilling cold and searing hot at the same time, coupled with the most agonizing pain he ever felt in his life. Not even what happened to him against Shamshel could come even close to this. And whatever it was, it completely sapped his strength, both physically and mentally, a feeling of terror and helplessness rising from his gut as he felt himself touched by the oppressive presence.

It felt like an eternity before he finally felt the wrongness lessen, a third presence wrapping itself around him like a comfortable embrace, veiling the wrongness like a cooling breeze on a summer day.

When he finally came to, Kaworu realized he was lying on the floor butt-naked, a pool of vomit
splattered over the tile in front of him. He also felt an arm around his waist, another arm cradling his forehead, and a breath tickling the upper side of his face.

"Are you feeling better now?" – Rei asked in a soft tone.

Kaworu had to work his numb lips several times before he managed to force out an answer. – "...y-yeah... what...?"

"It would seem that your interaction with that Sealing Weapon has weakened a mental block." – Tabris replied. – "This block has now become undone, possibly as a result of the presence of another Angel."

"Another one?"

"It is still distant, but I feel it too." – Rei added.

"What did you do? To make it stop."

"I am shielding you from its influence. If what Tabris claims is true, your adverse reaction just now was caused by a sensory overload from never having been exposed to such stimuli. You are oversensitive."

"What about you?"

"I find it... unsettling but bearable. Do not concern yourself about me."

Rei finally disentangled herself from Kaworu, allowing him to shakily sit up. He still felt weak.

"How long can you keep doing it?"

"Do not concern yourself about me." – she repeated. – "I will do it for as long as required."

"But if it hurts you~"

"I will not let you suffer." – she cut him off. – "I told you I will help in whatever way I can. This is something only I can do. And I will do it."

Kaworu just mutely nodded, not feeling the strength to keep pressing the issue. – "I'm cold."

"Then let us get you dressed."

Rei slid an arm under his and helped him up, though his legs felt like they could give out at any moment. At the same time however, Kaworu felt her bare breast pressing against him and he looked down to see her rather... scantily dressed, jeans haphazardly shoved down to below her knees and top lying off to the side to leave her wearing nothing above knee level.

"...why are you almost naked?"

"I needed skin contact."

"What for?"

"To calm you down." – She paused and glanced downwards. – "It worked."

Kaworu didn't especially like to feel awkward but right now, aside from explaining a crucial thing, it was a welcome distraction.
Having an internal air pressure lower than the ambient pressure outside in order to create a directional airflow inwards makes the entire Geofront biosafety level 3 compliant with both US and European standards. For reference, a facility's biosafety level may range from 1 to 4, from lowest to highest. Level 3 is suitable for work on potentially lethal but treatable biological agents; level 4, which ups the ante to lethal agents with no cure, requires a vacuum room, multiple sterilizers and those pressurized hazmat suits often seen in viral disaster movies.

The exposition in this chapter refers to several lifeforms unknown to those not familiar with Half-Life. All arrived to Earth during Second Impact from Xen, although none are actually native there. Not much is known about their biochemical makeup, although their extended stay on Earth, coupled with houndeyes and bullsquids both being observed to consume human corpses without ill effects, indicates that they are compatible with Earth life. The biggest difference is probably the fact that they all have yellow-greenish blood.

Headcrabs are creatures about the size of a watermelon, sporting a pair of spindly forelegs and a number of shorter beaks along their bottom. Their bottom itself is practically a large mouth. No eyes or other sensory organs are visible, but they can still navigate by sight somehow, despite usually preferring dark and cramped places. While headcrabs trudge around at a slow pace, they are capable of using their forelegs to leap across a surprisingly large distance in one bound, which brings us to the creature's biggest hazard. As headcrabs have no natural weaponry aside from clawing with their forelegs, they developed a rather nightmarish way to escape predation: they leap onto a larger lifeform and use their beaks to grab onto the top of the victim's head, cracking the skull open and directly interfacing with the victim's brain through unknown biological processes. Through this parasitic attachment, the headcrab basically hijacks motor control of the body while riding the host's head, utilizing unknown mutagenic processes to warp the host body: the front of the chest splits open into some kind of maw and the fingers elongate into makeshift claws. Coupled with the fact that the headcrab is only able to move the host around in a slow shuffle, the result is, for all intents and purposes, a zombie - and they are indeed referred to as such in-universe. For those familiar with Halo and Alien, the headcrab is basically a hybrid between a Flood infection form (though Half-Life predates Halo by years) and a facehugger. Once it is attached, the headcrab is impossible to remove without killing the host - which is made even more disturbing by the fact that said host is fully conscious the whole time and retains enough control over the lungs and mouth to scream and beg for death, even as their body rots away around them.
As soon as the door to the conference-room-turned-impromptu-briefing-room opened, Shephard
looked up, mouth already opening to say something, when he noticed Kaworu leaning on Rei's
shoulder. – "What's the matter with him?"

Kaworu shook his head and tried to straighten up, mostly successfully. – "I'm fine. What's going
on?"

Next to Yui, Sanada's eyes shifted from Kaworu to Rei before narrowing.

"Another of those things just showed up. Ambushed a carrier group and wiped them all out in less
than two minutes; really put the fear of God into the navy. They're all scared as fuck."

"Language, colonel." – Yui cut in, looking up from her tablet.

He waved her off. – "Yeah, yeah. Anyway, good to know the brass finally wised up and stopped
throwing men at those things when it clearly didn't work." – Shephard shook his head in distaste. –
"Never liked serving pricks like that, but we grunts tend to not get to pick and choose where to go.
Speaking of which, did Keel ask you to jump in this time?"

"Yes, he did." – Yui replied, this time without looking up.

"And do the military know about it?"

"Yes. They are leaving the situation in our hands."

"Well then... I think your toy is about to have its final exam. Hope it works as advertised, because it's
double or nothing this time."

Yui gave Shephard a flat look. – "I am aware of that. I collated a complete list of our Evangelion-
related assets currently available." – she remarked, practically pushing her tablet into his hands.

"Okay, um... can you brief the kids while I read this?"

"Of course."

With a few commands on the keyboard at the head of the conference table, Yui turned on the table's
built-in hologram emitters, causing the 3D image of a blue octahedron to materialize above the table.

'Oh, this is not good.'

Kaworu's head perked up at Tabris' less-than-optimistic tone. 'What?'

'It looks like Sammael just, to use an expression you are familiar with, stopped screwing around. '

"This entity is different from the ones we faced so far." – Yui began. – "The two previous ones
appeared to be primarily close quarters combatants, supplemented with limited ranged attack
capabilities. This one, however, appears to be a purely ranged combatant, armed with a focused
particle beam cannon of extremely high destructive power."
"How high?" – Kaworu asked.

"Battering ram meets window' high." – Shephard murmured before scrolling down on the tablet's screen.

"Quite so. It seems to have a variable power output, capable of a sustained low-power beam or a focused high-power blast. With that said, even the sustained beam is capable of cutting spaceships in half, so the Evangelions won't be able to withstand it for long."

"Evasion is priority." – Rei noted.

"That's right. A frontal assault is suicide. Closing in on it might not be possible." – Shephard added, putting the tablet onto the conference table.

"Why would we have to get close?" – Kaworu asked.

"Because you took down the other two from up close. This one's got that energy shield too, so I figure you might have trouble killing it from afar. It's like a moving fortress."

"So we can't kill it from afar because it has a shield, but we can't kill it from up close either because it will vaporize us before we get close enough."

Shephard nodded. – "That about sums it up."

"How are we supposed to do it, then?"

"I have no idea. You two go get ready and I'll try to come up with something in the meantime."

"How much time do we have?"

"Three hours tops. That thing dropped out of orbit practically right on top of Japan, so we never had much advance warning to begin with, plus I'd like to hit it in the countryside if possible. Last battle really did a number on the city; no casualties, but a lot of collateral damage. I figured we should do something about that – preferably before the government decides to have the AEL pay the reconstruction bills."

"We don't have that kind of money, colonel." – Yui piped in.

"You think they'd care? Anyway, is this all you have?" – the man asked, gesturing at the tablet.

"There is something else." – Yui paused with evident hesitation. – "If push comes to shove and all else fails... my crew and I might be able to bring Unit-02 partially online."

"It's ready?"

"It's still incomplete, so I cannot vouch for its reliability under combat conditions. However, we do not have a pilot for it, so I recommend activating it only as a last resort, in case one or either of the other units are rendered inoperable."

"And one of our present pilots could switch over to it." – Shephard finished her thought. – "Let's hope that won't happen... but keep it warmed up, just in case."

As the two adults continued to talk, Kaworu shared a look with Rei before directing his attention inward. 'Tabris. You said this Angel is trouble, right?'

'To you, trouble is putting it mildly.'
'What do you know?'

'First, it is not actually an Angel. It is a non-sentient artificial construct made in the likeness of an Angel.'

'A drone?'

'Yes. Armed reconnaissance and autonomous hunter-killer. This one is probably here as a scout.'

'Then why did it attack that carrier group?' Kaworu joined in.

'They probably attacked it first. It might be dumb, but it does have a threat recognition protocol. That or it was manually controlled at the time. Either way, destroying it won't help you much.'

'Why?'

'Why do you think they sent a drone instead of an Angel? It's expendable. Even if you somehow manage to destroy it, there are literally thousands more to replace it. Or did you believe your race is the only one to figure out mass production?'

A chill ran down on Kaworu's back at that. 'Any weaknesses?'

'That I don't know. Drones are not my specialty.'

Kaworu was shaken out of his thoughts by everyone around him standing up, making him realize the briefing was over.

Immediately after Kaworu stepped out of the room behind Shephard however, Sanada suddenly laid a hand on Rei's shoulder to hold her back. – "A word."

"I am fine." – Rei replied immediately, her tone carrying a slight edge. She knew what this was about and inwardly felt dismayed that he noticed the way she carried herself.

It wasn't like she could do otherwise. Rei was no stranger to injury and while she healed quickly, she didn't heal instantly. Therefore, she had to learn her body's limits to know how far she can go and what to do if she went beyond that line.

But sometimes, she just couldn't help it. When she stormed into the locker room's shower and saw Kaworu convulsing on the floor, Rei almost lost her self-control right then and there. Restraining him so that he won't hurt himself trashing around was only difficult because of his wet skin not being particularly cooperative towards being grabbed and held without slipping out of her grasp. Even so, she managed to immobilize him for his own safety... but only his body.

She was not at all prepared for when his body suddenly spasmed and let loose a telekinetic blast directly above, bending the shower head 180° backwards and making it spray water everywhere. Rei had scarcely a moment to realize he was unconsciously lashing out at whatever was hurting him before he unleashed a second, much more massive blast that obliterated the shower cubicle's sides and punched a meter-wide crater into the tiled wall, sending shattered pieces of tiles and even a few chunks of concrete flying everywhere.

And when she tried to shield his mind, the instant she touched it, he blindly lashed out in her direction. Rei was significantly tougher than an ordinary person... which she suspected was the only reason why she could walk away from being hit with such force. Even so, the telekinetic blow hit her with the force of a rocket-assisted sledgehammer, stabbing pain flaring up in her chest a moment
before she felt the coppery taste of blood in her mouth.

Afterwards, while Kaworu was trying to dress himself without falling over from weakness, Rei covertly reached under her shirt and suppressed a wince when her probing fingertips found and confirmed the cracked rib. It wasn't the first time she had one and at least it didn't puncture her lung, but it still hurt like hell – especially with Kaworu leaning on her shoulder for support.

Even so, Rei silently grit her teeth and endured without a sound. For him, she wasn't going to let mere pain stop her. For him, she wasn't going to let anything stop her.

Not even death.

"I'm not sure about that." – Sanada remarked. – "You can hide it from others, but not from me. I'm a doctor, I can tell when someone is in pain. What happened?"

"It is of no consequence."

He gave her a look she was very much familiar with. – "Rei. You know I can ground you if I believe your health isn't up to piloting."

"I am still able to perform my duties. Medical attention can wait."

"At least let me examine you. I need to know."

"Later."

"Why are you being so stubborn?"

"I cannot be grounded. Not now." – She looked away. – "After the battle, I will submit to an examination. But I have to go."

It was about twenty seconds after the door closed behind the girl that Sanada sat down at the conference table and rested his forehead on his knuckles with a sigh of resignation.

'She knows.'

____________________________________________________

Two hours later

"You guys doin' okay?"

"No problems on my end."

"You sure? No cockpit phobia from last time or anything?"

"No. I'm ready."

While he wasn't lying, Kaworu would be if he were to say that he already forgot about last time. That was an experience he knew he was going to remember for the rest of his life... even without knowing that the human mind tends to recall bad memories better than good ones.

The teen sighed and flexed his fingers on the control sticks. – "I hope this won't take long. I'm hungry."

"Tell you what. Make it back alive and chow's on me." – Shephard replied casually.
"I've been meaning to ask... why are you always the one cooking?"

"Can you cook?"

"Not really."

"There's your answer."

"Why not have Asuka cook?"

"...if you know what's good for you, don't let Asuka into the kitchen. I'm not kidding, just... don't."

Kaworu titled his head to the side, puzzled at Shephard's almost spooked tone. – "Why?"

"Few years back, she tried to surprise me with a home-cooked meal when I had to stay at work for a few days."

"And?"

"Let's just say I had to pretend I ate something wrong at the base cafeteria. And if either of you tell her this, I'll make extra sure to haunt you from beyond the grave." – From the corner of his eye, Kaworu saw Rei raise an eyebrow in her own comm window. – "Assuming we all survive this one, that is."

"You're not going to tell us that we will survive and stuff like that?"

"You ain't little kids and you know very well what you're going into. Fancy words won't change the fact that you could very well die in the next minutes; that's all up to you."

Honesty or no, that did not alleviate Kaworu's tension at all. – "No pressure, then."

"Yep. That's war for you." – Shephard image in the comm window briefly looked to the side. – "Alright, Doc says you're about to have company. Heads up."

Kaworu looked around, even though the scenery outside was still the same as when Unit-01 settled down: hills as far as the eye could see, most of them forested. While there were occasional trees that were still mostly green, the great majority of the foliage had either fallen to the ground already or were in the process of doing so. It wasn't an unfamiliar sight to him; he was still on the same northern hemisphere he grew up on, after all.

And it was somewhat of a welcome sight after having spent nearly an hour looking at the entry plug's wall while the transport vehicle carrying his Evangelion like a giant, wheeled stretcher scaled the wall of the Geofront. Even if he would've turned the external display on, he would've seen nothing but the tarp drawn over the Evangelion anyway.

Evidently, Yui was still trying to keep the Evangelions' existence a secret. For what reason, though, considering that the government and the military already knew about it, Kaworu had no idea.

"Why are we hiding out here, anyway?"

"Because that is the only spot the Evangelions could get to without trampling several square kilometers' worth of forest underfoot." – Yui replied from off-screen. – "The target will pass by beyond the ridge; you will have visual contact soon."

Unit-01 turned its head to glance at the top of the hill it was currently perched up against.
"What's our plan?" – Kaworu asked as he turned his Evangelion around and walked uphill a hundred meters until he could see just over the peak and down into the valley beyond.

"The colonel tells me an ambush of sort has been set up." – At that, a point was marked on the valley floor. Kaworu managed to figure out the display's zoom controls enough to take a closer look and noticed a conspicuous lack of grass. – "You are to distract the target."

It wasn't even a minute before Kaworu saw it, exactly as it looked like on the hologram. It was bigger than he thought – much bigger. Part of him noted to ask Yui to provide a size reference for future briefings.

"I see it."

"That's our guy alright. Unit-00, think you can give it a greeting with that cannon?"

"Understood."

Behind the hill, Unit-00 stepped back with one feet and raised its cannon, taking a moment to aim before firing into the air. Almost immediately, the heads-up display of Kaworu's entry plug marked the shell as it sailed above the ridge and towards its target...

...yet a split second before impact, a small, lightning-fast beam lanced out from the top of the octahedron and speared the shell clean through, causing it to detonate in mid-air.

"Tactical alert: target has active point defenses." – Adam announced at the same time as Unit-01 ducked behind the ridge.

"Okay, that didn't work." – Kaworu reported. – "Hope it didn't see u-

He couldn't finish before the hill under him swelled. The next moment, the world exploded into light.

It was as if his entire front was hit with a sledgehammer. The Evangelion was flung away as if it was just a toy, limbs flailing all over as Kaworu unsuccessfully tried to grab onto something, anything. Other than his assault rifle, of course, which he also lost somewhere during his involuntary flight. But since air isn't cooperative with being grabbed, he ultimately ended up being treated to an extreme closeup of the soil under Unit-01's face while the entry plug's seatbelts rather uncomfortably insisted that his body stay in the seat.

And as he got his bearings and looked behind himself, a significant chunk of the hill was missing in a semi-circle shape, the walls of the furrow glowing yellow-hot as the occasional piece of dirt pinged off of Unit-01's armor.

"You still there, kids?!"

"No damage sustained." – Rei replied immediately, yet audibly on edge.

"...what the hell just happened?!" – Kaworu demanded, face practically snow-white as he hurried to get his Evangelion back on its feet.

"The target's beam attack bore through the hill." – Lilith replied with audible unease.

"It must've traced back the shell's trajectory." – Shephard added. Kaworu did not need to see his face to know that the man was likewise white as a wall. – "That was way too fucking close to not have been counter-battery fire!"
"Tactical analysis: enemy attack was delayed by terrain. Recommend maintaining terrain masking to maximize time window for evasion."

"Adam is right. We cannot withstand that kind of offensive power head-on."

Kaworu opened his mouth to ask the AIs what to do now, but didn't get the chance before Rei yelled. – "Move! Now!"

Already pumped full of adrenaline from the knowledge of having nearly gotten obliterated just seconds ago, the boy didn't bother to ask. He threw Unit-01 to the side, barely a moment before his former location was glassed by multiple energy beams striking from directly above. Scrambling his Evangelion back onto its feet, Kaworu's head snapped up just in time to see a second barrage of beams shoot over the hilltop and bend in mid-air, directly towards them.

While he wasn't hit directly, the impact next to him shoved Unit-01 aside with enough force to almost make him fall over once again.

"Tactical alert: aerial radar contacts approaching from multiple vectors."

He suddenly caught movement from the corner of his eye just in time to feel searing pain in his leg as a beam grazed Unit-01's calf.

"What the hell are these things?!

He heard Adam say something, but he didn't have time to listen. Kaworu pushed Unit-01 into a sprint, but two of the small shard-like objects immediately flew in front of him and fired at his legs. Not seeing any other option, he jumped, hands lashing out at the shards.

The Evangelion's fingers never got within a meter of the shards before they danced out of reach, just as a third one flitted into position to Unit-01's right and fired. Kaworu saw it coming but, having still been in mid-air, he couldn't stop his momentum from carrying him right into the shot. The beam drilled through Unit-01's right shoulder rack, leaving a gaping, molten hole.

Kaworu tried to turn what otherwise would've been an unceremonious belly-flop against the ground into something more controlled, but found out the hard way that muscle memory does not translate to Evangelion piloting. Coupled with the added weight of its backpack reactor unbalancing its center of mass, Unit-01 tumbled down the hill end over end, sending dirt flying everywhere.

And even while his bearings inside the entry plug were thrown completely out of touch with the outside world, Kaworu could not miss the pain from the shards hitting his Evangelion mid-tumble. Over and over again.

Above, Rei saw Unit-01 falling and her blood ran cold, failing to evade an attack that grazed Unit-00 on the left thigh. Gritting her teeth, she evaded the next one by using her Evangelion's right leg as a pivot to whirl around 180° counterclockwise and step to the right in the same move. She then launched herself into a sideways leap, pushing Unit-00 hard enough to feel a small spike of pain in her legs – but it succeeded in evading the next barrage of beams the Angel aimed at her.

'I need to cover him.'

Quickly running her eyes over the ground where Unit-01 landed after the Angel's opening attack, Rei spotted the abandoned assault rifle and immediately dashed towards it. Spotting the light of another incoming barrage illuminating the grass around her, she abruptly kicked herself off-course, causing the beams to hit only that same grass instead of her.
Breaking her stride, Rei dug Unit-00's heels into the ground and scooped up the rifle mid-slide, already moving to take aim before she finished standing back up, muzzle whipping towards one of the shards flocking above Unit-01.

Fortunately, the shard was anything but bulletproof: the rifle's high-powered bullet instantly shattered it as if it was made of glass. As if on cue, the other shards instantly turned around and darted towards her... but Rei was already on target. Single shot after single shot rang out and shard after shard shattered; the last one barely managed to get off a single beam Rei simply raised her arm to evade.

"Lilith, query Adam for a damage report." – the girl snapped off crisply. With all immediate threats gone, she had enough breathing room to confirm with a quick glance that Unit-01's entry plug hatch was undamaged.

"Already done." – Yui interjected, the data appearing on Rei's heads-up display. – "Moderate damage, but he can still move."

"Target has remote weaponry and indirect fire capabilities; currently in danger of suppression. Requesting mission update."

"That thing is still moving on its original course." – Shephard spoke up tersely. – "Now listen up. In about forty seconds, it's going to get blown to hell by a little surprise I had the army set up. Thing is, I have no idea if it will work or not, so I need you to do something."

"What is it?"

"I know this'll sound crazy, but I need you to get that thing's attention. Yes, doc, I know! I don't need you to kill it, just keep it focused on you so that it won't see the trap coming – and for fuck's sake, keep your head down!"

"Understood."

"Rei, are you sure?" – Yui interjected again.

The girl glanced at the damaged Unit-01 and her expression steeled. – "I can do it."

Without further words, Unit-00 quickly scaled the hill and took aim at its quarry.

20 seconds.

Rei felt anger bubbling up in her. Both at the drone and at herself. It hurt the only person in the world she cared about – and even worse, it did so in retaliation to her own attack.

15 seconds.

10 seconds.

She tightened her Evangelion's grip on the rifle. The mission wasn't over yet.

5 seconds.

The rifle came to life with a thunderous roar.

Almost immediately, a rapid burst of pencil-thin beams shot away from the drone's tips to meet Unit-00's bullets, intercepting each and every single one. Yet Rei kept firing regardless, eyes glaring past the muzzle flash at her target.
As soon as she saw a flash, she threw herself to the side... a moment before the outside world was bathed in the brilliance of a miniature sun. Yet instead of the entry plug's wall darkening to dampen the flash, the display warped and pixelated at the same moment Rei felt a stab of pain in her head powerful enough to make her cry out. She distantly felt control of the Evangelion abruptly slip away from her before the shockwave hit, finally felling Unit-00.

Then the entry plug darkened around her, giving her eyes merciful respite.

The only sound she heard was her own panting, the vibrating spots in her vision slowly clearing away until she could see the metallic walls around her. – "...Lilith?"

No response came. About ten seconds later, she heard the distant sounds of circuit breakers before the familiar hum enveloped her once more, the center of the panoramic display rapidly flashing boot code before the heads-up display came back online.

"I am sorry. I did not expect that to happen."

"What happened?"

"Electromagnetic pulse. I had to execute a hard shutdown and wait until the charge was grounded through my armor."

Rei sighed and massaged her still aching head. – "I felt it too."

"I know. My organic tissue is unaffected, but the cybernetic parts are not. Even the surge protectors could not completely prevent feedback in the synchronization circuits. I am sorry." – the AI repeated.

"I do not blame you. Do we have the communication link back online?"

Geofront, AEL Headquarters
1957 hours

Privately, Shephard decided he did not like the improvised briefing room all that much. It just... didn't feel like one. Clashing architecture was one thing, but he was the only one who was even in uniform. Well, military dress uniform. The facility had its own set of uniforms for personnel, but they were all civilians, so he didn't think it counted.

Not that he liked wearing his dress uniform, but the AEL's dress code also meant that he would've stuck out like a sore thumb in civilian clothes and would've no doubt sent a message of considering himself above the lowly peasants. Besides, if there's one thing boot camp hammers into someone, it's to not whine about unfavorable conditions but to grit one's teeth and suck it up.

Plus he was very much aware that wearing clothes he didn't like was the least of his worries right now.

"Well, that was a massive clusterfuck."

"Language, colonel."

He sipped from his coffee before setting the cup aside, well away from any paper- or electronics-based objects. Getting yelled at for damaging company property was something he really didn't need at the moment. – "Alright, let's recount what we know. That thing is impossible to hit with physical ammunition. Even trying will get the offender zapped by a crazy laser show. Cover is all but useless..."
because it'll shoot over or through it."

He brought up a hologram of the entity, a large, black scorch mark marring its cracked surface.

"Trapping it didn't work either. I don't know how it survived a 25 kiloton nuke going off under it, but it did. Roughed it up badly, but it's still moving. Can't outrange it either; the navy tried to hit it with orbital bombardment just before it reached the city, turns out that thing can fire all the way up into orbit, so sniping's out."

"I'm still having a hard time believing the army lent you a tactical nuclear weapon." – Yui remarked, the hologram changing into an image of a massive, circular crater surrounded by blackened soil with a glassy shine only barely visible under the waning light of a setting sun.

"Calhoun authorized it."

"Still, are you sure it was the right call? Especially so close to the city."

"That valley was empty, so no collateral damage. Army's decontaminating the site now and most of the fallout was blown out to sea by wind. Do you really think I would've done this if civilians would've gotten killed in the process? Aside from dumbasses who will no doubt eat local seafood despite being explicitly told not to, I mean." – He turned to Hyuga. – "Anyway, the Angel is above us right now, correct?"

"Yes."

"Angel?"

If Shephard's mind wasn't busy thinking about his next move, he might have noticed that what he thought was surprise in Yui's voice was actually... startled.

But he didn't, so he just shrugged. – "That's what Nagisa's calling these things, for some reason. What's it doing?"

Hyuga brought up the Angel's hologram again before the image zoomed out into a to-scale diagram of Tokyo-2 and the Geofront. Next to the diagram was a street camera image of a needle-like spike extended from the bottom pit of the Angel's body, penetrating the pavement. – "It lowered some kind of probe into the ground that's periodically giving off low-frequency impulses coinciding with a spike in electromagnetic emissions." – As if on cue, the room slightly trembled from a barely audible, deep sound. – "It appears to be something between sonar and ground-penetrating radar."

"So it's scanning us." – Shephard made a thoughtful hum to himself. – "It didn't behave like the other ones either. Almost as if it's a UAV or something."

"What is it looking for?"

"Don't know. We need to take it out either way; maybe it hasn't found what it was looking for and we can beat it to the punch." – Shephard stretched himself with a sigh. – "Alright, I need options."

"Could we use some kind of energy weapon?" – Hyuga asked. – "I mean, if bullets and missiles are a no-go, why not use something the... Angel can't shoot down mid-flight? I know some defense contractors are working on Tau cannons; could we borrow a prototype from Gehirn or something like that?"

"Not sure that'll work. Even if they happen to have one on Earth right now, the Angel still has that shield. We don't know if it'll be strong enough to penetrate, let alone kill it before it returns the
favor." – Shephard paused in his thoughts again. – "Based on what we've seen in the first engagement, I think we should assume that we don't have the teeth to take it out from afar."

"You mean we have to get close?"

"Yeah, but it's not going to be easy. Doc, how durable is the C-type equipment?"

Yui shook her head. – "Not enough. Its point defense turrets might protect against the smaller drones, but reactive armor won't work against particle beams. And at close range, its bulk will make evasion harder."

"Alright, endurance option is out. We need speed."

"Storm rollers?"

"Not enough."

Shephard looked over the city map on the tablet in front of him and compared the Angel's position with those of the AEL's cargo lifts and surface access tunnels before making a hum of dissatisfaction.

"And we can't come up under it either... how about above? Do we have A-type equipment ready?"

"No."

"Damn."

Yui just watched as Shephard stood up and started pacing back and forth, obviously deep in thought, before she directed her attention at Hyuga. – "What's the damage assessment with the Evangelions?"

"Unit-00 has a minor burn mark on the left leg, but nothing that affects mobility. We replace the leg armor and it's back to 100%. It's Unit-01 that's a problem."

"How bad is it?"

"Minor to moderate wounds all over the body... some of the hits penetrated all the way to the other side. Nothing we can fix on short notice. Mobility's affected, but it can still move. But if Nagisa synchronizes with the Evangelion as it is, he'll be in constant pain. If it becomes necessary, are we going to give him painkillers?"

"That won't work." – Yui replied. – "The neural interface transmits the pain signal directly to his brain; there aren't any neurotransmitters we can block. We'll have to dampen the somatosensory output on the interface's side--"

"Doc..." – Shephard spoke up suddenly, halting in his tracks.

"What is it?"

"Do we have D-type equipment?"

Yui raised both eyebrows at the unusual question. – "Hazardous environment type? It can't withstand a direct hit any more than C-type can and is even bulkier."

"How good is its heat resistance?"

"Very. Why?"
"And if you were to suit up an Evangelion with it, how heavy is it?"

"...I still don't follow."

Shephard snapped his fingers three times in rapid succession. – "I have an idea. Call Calhoun and tell him we need a frigate. And call your girl too, I need to brief her."

Geofront
Thirty minutes later

He didn't look up when he heard the footsteps. There was no need; he knew who it was, considering that there was only one person who seemingly always knew where to look for him. At this time of day, the Geofront was dark around him; even he was only illuminated by the 'street light' above him, huddling on the outdoor bench in his pale plugsuit like a specter.

He didn't look up when said person sat next to him on the bench. There was no need; he knew that he would be heard either way.

"Back in September, I got caught up in all this by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the last battle, I almost got my brain fried. And now?" – Kaworu sighed. – "Now I got Unit-01 totaled."

"It is under repairs." – Rei replied.

"Which it shouldn't be if I would've done my job properly." – He looked up at her. – "...I'm really not cut out for this, am I?"

"What makes you believe that?"

"Three times now, I got involved in all this. And three times now, I fucked up. Once or twice, it could be bad luck, but thrice? I shouldn't even be here."

Kaworu had no illusions about his abilities or competence. While nothing made someone reevaluate their priorities quite like a close brush with death, that wasn't why he felt doubt. Hindsight is 20/20, as the saying goes, and right now, the teen felt like an overenthusiastic child who jumped straight into something despite being explicitly warned against it, made a mess of things and accordingly got humiliatingly chastised.

Except in this case, he was both the one who chastised and the one who got chastised.

"Look at me. I'm not some kind of prodigy or anything; I was a complete idiot to think I could do this."

"Are you thinking of resignation?"

"Not sure that's even an option... considering how I got recruited in the first place." – Kaworu grumbled morosely, looking back down at the ground.

He still remembered Yui's unspoken warning that she would consider him a loose end if he were to try and cut ties with the company. And she seemed like the type of woman who wouldn't let anyone or anything get in the way of whatever she was trying to achieve – a trait Kaworu could see in Rei as well, surprisingly enough.

For some reason, it would seem that circumstances were hellbent on intertwining his fate with danger.
"It's not even that. On one hand, I seriously thought of leaving... but..."

"But?" – Rei prompted.

"What about you? You're way better at this than I am, but if I just bail out, you'll have to fight alone."

"Do not worry about me."

"I do."

And there was that. As much as he didn't like being in the current situation, Kaworu knew very well that he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he were to get out of it at someone else's expense. Growing up on the streets bestows upon one a survival-of-the-fittest mentality... but not on Kaworu. He never found himself being unable to care.

"Do you... want me to leave with you?" – Rei asked hesitantly after a while. Kaworu didn't consider himself very good at reading people, but that hesitation told him enough.

She also cared. In her own way.

"I don't know. The two of us are the only ones who know how to pilot an Evangelion. If we bail out on the company, who's going to do it? I may be in over my head here, but I don't want others to pay the price for it."

And he wanted to be able to look at a mirror and look himself in the eye, even though he didn't say that out loud.

"So if I leave, it's going to make things harder for you. If we both leave, it's going to make things harder for everyone. If neither of us leaves, sooner or later I'll get at least myself but possibly both of us killed. No matter what I do, someone else will pay the price."

When he heard the rustling from her direction, Kaworu thought the girl was about to get up and leave... only for her to draw her arms around him and pull him into a hug, resting his head on her chest. Even though their plugsuits didn't let much of her body heat through, it was still much warmer than the chilly November air surrounding them.

"If your concern is due to feeling you are not strong enough... then become strong. I told you before: being aware of one's limitations is good. It still stands. And if at any time you feel your own strength is not enough... you will always have mine at your side. Remember that when doubt descends." – she whispered, resting her chin on the top of his head.

"Why are you like this?" – Kaworu murmured.

"Because you are all I have in this world. As long as my body still draws breath, you will not die."

They stayed like that for minutes, Kaworu silently savoring the source of warmth and finding himself calming down from listening to her slow breathing.

"Did the colonel come up with an idea on how to beat that drone?"

"Yes, although it is quite... audacious. I will be departing shortly." – Kaworu was about to ask where to when Rei laid a finger on his lips. – "Rest now. The operation will begin in six hours and you will need all your concentration to perform your duty."
0238 hours

"You awake?"

Until the sudden radio call, Kaworu wasn’t. But it did a fine job at jolting him awake - not that he was sleeping all that deeply, considering the situation.

The teen shook his head to clear it, blinking away his sleepiness to focus on his surroundings. According to the entry plug’s display and his own sense of balance, Unit-01 was still face-up in the surface access tunnel spiraling from the Geofront to the surface, clamped to the massive transport vehicle. A blinking display to his left told him that the Evangelion’s synchronization circuits were still in a stage 3 lockdown to ensure he won’t damage or overturn the transport by trying to move while attached to it. – "Y-yeah. Are we starting?"

"Soon." – "Your girlfriend is about to start her approach."

"How many times do I have to tell you that Rei is not my girlfriend?"

"Alright, alright."

"And what did you mean by 'approach'?"

"You’ll see. If this works out, it's going to be one hell of a show."

"And if it doesn't?"

"She'll be smeared over the better part of a kilometer."

...that did not sound reassuring.

At all.

"...what the hell did you ask her to do?"

"Don't worry about that now. Just concentrate on what you have to do."

"Well, what is it that I have to do? You haven't even told me yet."

"Oh, right. Sorry." – Shephard rubbed his eyes. – "What I need you to do is the same as last time."

"You mean get its attention and almost get blown to pieces?" – Kaworu asked skeptically.

"Minus the 'getting blown to pieces' part. You'll play decoy and draw its attention. The way I see it, this Angel acts almost like a robot, only attacking what poses a threat to it. I don’t know if it’ll interpret her approach as a threat, so you’ll give it something else to focus on, just in case."

'He figured out Ramiels are just drones?' Tabris noted with mild surprise. 'He's not stupid at all.'

"We’re sending you up as far away from the Angel as we can." – Shephard continued. – "Shoot it, then haul ass. Don't even try to hurt it; just keep your distance and keep moving. Unit-00 will take care of the rest; all you need to do is buy time for her to get into position. You got that?"

"Yeah. Anything else?"

"What, this isn't enough?" – After a moment, the man sighed. – "Sorry. I feel like I'm about to collapse right where I stand; I swear, whoever the AEL's buying their coffee from is ripping them off.
Same time  
Tokyo-2, Outer District 6

Right then and there, Asuka decided she definitely didn't like being on Earth during the winter months. It was just too damn cold.

Or maybe it was her who was just too used to being in a climate-controlled environment, she didn't know. But then again, she wasn't used to being outdoors without breathing equipment either. Her father took her outside on a semi-frequent basis when she was younger to make sure she didn't develop agoraphobia, so she wasn't scared even when she was standing under the open sky. But standing on a city street among multi-story buildings like she did on a daily basis and standing on a roof like she was doing right now were completely different things.

Another alarm in the middle of the afternoon. Last time this happened, Asuka clearly felt the shelter's floor rumbling under her.

When she both heard about and saw herself the damage to the city the next day, it didn't take her for even a second to realize a battle took place.

Who was fighting? Why? And why here?

She couldn't stop thinking about it. And she didn't miss the fact that, just after the civil defense sirens sounded last time, Nagisa and Ikari disappeared without a trace and never returned to the shelter.

Or how her father and Nagisa left home together – and a few hours later, how her father called her, tersely asked her where she was and ordered her to go to the nearest shelter just seconds before the civil defense sirens started howling. She tried to ask him about it, only for him to brush her off, repeat his order and hang up.

That was pretty much a straight-up invitation for her to not comply.

To be honest, Asuka did go to the shelter. But nothing happened for hours. Even boredom couldn't rein her tense anticipation in enough to fall asleep like everyone else in the shelter.

And once no one was awake, no one cared when she slipped out.

She wasn't looking for trouble, but she had to know. Not for telling others; as the daughter of a military officer and someone aspiring for a military career herself, Asuka knew very well that there were secrets worth imprisonment or worse. Especially if the one telling them wasn't supposed to know about it either.

Morbidly enough, it actually reminded her of something Hikari showed her a couple of days ago. The pigtailed girl had calligraphy as her hobby and while Asuka couldn't for the life of her interpret the confusing painted pictographs she saw on Hikari's shelf, there was one that grabbed her attention. Asuka had seen before images and even figurines depicting three monkey heads: one covering its eyes, another covering its ears, the third covering its mouth. It was Hikari who explained to her that it was an ancient proverb.

See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

It wasn't womanly curiosity that drove her to find the tallest building nearby whose stairwell wasn't locked. As a soldier, she had to be aware of the situation at all times. But when she saw the giant,
diamond-shaped crystal hovering over the city, she wasn't anywhere closer to knowing what was going on.

At first she thought it was just a gigantic hologram until she noticed how its lower half was reflecting the city's lights like a mirror. Whether it was refracting light, she couldn't tell; not a single star was visible due to light pollution. Not that it would've meant anything to her, as Asuka only knew as much physics as understanding a battleframe's workings strictly required, from knowing how much power to apply to a limb for the desired result, to how high she could push a Durandal's second-gen deuterium/helium-3 fusion reactor before the neutron emission from deuterium/deuterium fusion becomes too much for the radiation shielding to contain and she starts losing years from her life expectancy. Not that the reactor wouldn't scram itself before that happened, but she still had to learn it.

In any case, Asuka couldn't figure out what the object was. It just floated there, rotating in place like an angular disco ball in slow motion. In fact, she was about to fall asleep when she heard a sound. A distant rumbling somewhere from the city. And at the same moment, the object stopped rotating.

That's when she saw it. Barely visible in the darkness, but something was moving, just inside the city limits, almost directly opposite of her.

The next moment, the distant object flared what Asuka instantly recognized as a muzzle flash and she rolled back onto her feet, ready to run the instant crossfire started hitting her position.

But no crossfire happened. Thin beams of light shot from the object's tips into the dark before the night turned to day. Asuka winced and rubbed her aching eyes to try and regain sight, to limited success: she could see for the most part, but the flaring afterimage of the energy beam the object launched at its attacker was refusing to leave her sight.

The thundering boom accompanying the blast didn't help either, although at least her hearing wasn't deadened. In fact, it was barely more straining on Asuka's ears than firing a handgun indoors without ear protection – and that was something she didn't like doing one bit, even without knowing that it wasn't healthy for her hearing to keep doing that.

As soon as she could see somewhat, Asuka noted to herself that the object's firing angle was constantly changing, as well as the direction it was being fired at from. Which meant that the unseen assailant was on the move... and it was fast. Much faster than any ground-based vehicle she had ever seen; Asuka guessed it was probably a G-46 VTOL gunship. Yet the incoming fire did not look like either a Buster's folding-fin anti-tank missiles, nor its unguided rockets, nor did the muzzle flash match either the caliber or the rate of fire of its gimbal autocannon.

And against something that big, who would send out just a single Buster?

Asuka knew of every craft currently in service in the military, but the mystery attacker was leaving her at a complete loss. Yet she couldn't even see it, much less identify what it was. Whenever the object near her fired, it cast off so much light as to make it impossible to see what it was shooting at.

Then it happened.

The blue object fired off another shot at just the right angle to catch its foe silhouetted against the beam.

An absolutely massive humanoid with... hair?

Darkness fell again, leaving a wide-eyed girl staring into the darkness with disbelief.
Asuka's brain was working at overtime to process what she just saw. In the split second she was able to see the combatant, there was no mistaking its metallic glint, nor the distinct shape of a rifle. It was artificial alright, just like a battleframe. But that was no battleframe she ever saw. Asuka only ever sat in the cockpit of a Durandal but she knew what the older battleframe models looked like: the Mk-I, a top-heavy, haphazard design with balance problems and a bad case of having wanted to be a do-everything vehicle so much that it ended up not doing anything well, and the Mk-II Gugnir, little more than an assault gun on legs specialized for long-range combat and designed specifically for use by pre-Impact tank crews.

Asuka heard rumors that Gehirn was about to finish development of the Mk-IV, but she also knew that the Mk-IV was supposed to be a six-legged, low-profile fire support model to replace the Gugnir. Not only the unknown she just saw was very much two-legged, its sheer scale dwarfed every battleframe she knew about. Even a Gugnir, the tallest battleframe currently in service, wouldn't have reached knee-height to that monster.

What was it?
Who built it?
Who was operating it?
Why was it having a gun-vs-laser shootout with a giant diamond in the middle of a major city?

She had absolutely no idea what was going on. She came up here expecting to find answers, only to end up with even more questions.

Asuka was ultimately shaken out of her thoughts by a rumbling sound even more distant than whatever the thing the blue object was shooting at. And it was coming behind her.

Turning to look, Asuka's eyes grew even larger when she spotted the source: a giant, airborne fireball, headed right in her direction.

'A meteor?! WHAT THE FUCK?!

Yet it wasn't a meteor.

Asuka barely caught the glimpse of a massive, bulky humanoid in the center of firestorm before it spontaneously exploded. At least, that's what the girl thought before a humanoid of the same proportions as the other one emerged from the burning debris, still on course towards her.

Asuka's brain clicked. Ablative heat shield for atmospheric reentry.

A trio of enormous parachutes erupted from the rear of the humanoid... only to snap off after a few seconds and disappear in the darkness.

Asuka threw herself to the ground and prayed to whatever was listening that the thing doesn't land on top of her.

It didn't.

The humanoid flipped over in the air with impossible grace before sailing over Asuka and plowing into the blue object feet-first.

This time, Asuka almost didn't dare look up for fear of seeing something that breaks her sanity for good.
As still and mechanical as the blue object looked like, it did notice the humanoid landing on it rather roughly. Currently it was chaotically turning and tilting, evidently attempting to shake its sudden passenger off. Yet said passenger evidently had none of it: from her experience with Durandals, Asuka instantly recognized the assault harpoons when they fired and lodged themselves into the blue object's surface, cracking it as if it was made of glass.

Then Asuka scarcely believed her eyes when the seemingly-crystalline blue object suddenly split open and impossibly warped into a shape she could best describe as a five-pointed star with a smaller five-pointed-star-shaped indent in the center. She barely saw the red orb floating in the center of the hollow before concentric rings of light materialized around the orb, accompanied by a rising hum.

And straight in front of the orb was the humanoid that dropped down from the sky, its assault harpoons still buried inside the object - except the humanoid was hanging in mid-air with its limbs forcibly spread, helplessly suspended like a marionette by the very cords it affixed itself to its foe with.

Asuka knew what was going to happen. She had seen the blue object fire its energy beam enough times to gauge how powerful it was... and right now, the trapped humanoid was about to get hit from almost point-blank range.

Yet it didn't happen.

Asuka could barely follow with her eye as the humanoid suddenly ejected a cord trapping its right arm and reached up to the vertical pod on its left shoulder, which split open. One lighting-fast backhand sweep, and the sound of a glass-like crack echoed across the cityscape. The blue object fell silent and still, the rings of light around the red orb dissipating as Asuka's eye caught the sight of a knife hilt sticking out of the orb.

One by one the assault harpoons ejected and the humanoid fell down, landing on the street below in a loud crash, whose dust cloud obscured it from Asuka's sight. She only spotted it again when it walked out of the cloud, its movement bizarrely reminding the girl more of a human than a battleframe.

About two city blocks later, the orange humanoid stopped in its tracks and glanced back at the still motionless blue object, revealing its cyclops-like eye before it resumed walking away.

Asuka was still watching it when the humanoid, without slowing down or looking behind, raised an arm and did the absolutely last thing she expected.

It snapped its fingers.

A moment later, the knife buried in the blue object detonated and the object, as if it was suddenly unfrozen, slowly rolled to the side and flattened several buildings under its hulk before going still once more, this time for good.

To be entirely honest, this chapter felt rather underwhelming. I couldn't make Ramiel go all-out because realistically, the Evas wouldn't stand a chance without an AT-field. Concessions had to be made and I feel they were made at the expense of enjoyment. The reason why Ramiel fired at the Evas at full power only once is because, after the Evas failed to meaningfully damage it, it downgraded their threat level – that is, Ramiel decided they're not worth the effort.

It's not arrogance to not use excessive force against a negligible threat, it's logic. Do you use a flamethrower to kill a single ant? No, you wouldn't. When the threat warrants that kind of force,
though, it's an entirely reasonable response; case in point, the Red Army resorting to artillery while trying to flush out Simo Häyhä alias White Death during the Winter War after he singlehandedly killed literally hundreds of them with just a rifle and took down every single counter-sniper sent after him.

The aircraft mentioned during Asuka's observation is essentially a space-capable version of the tillet VTOL crafts seen in canon, serving as a helicopter gunship analogue. It's technically a ground attack aircraft but it can engage larger airborne targets as well, like the air-to-air equivalent of a bomber. Armament-wise, it is equipped with a triple-barreled gatling autocannon in a rotating gimbal mount below the cockpit, as well as a pair of attack helicopter-like ordinance racks on each side, retractable into the main hull. Each rack carries 8 laser-guided folding-fin anti-tank missiles on the top of the rack and a trio of 12-tube launchers with unguided rockets on the bottom of the rack. The full payload is thus 16 missiles with HESH or HEAT warheads and 72 unguided rockets with high-explosive, white phosphorus or napalm-B warheads. There are also options to replace the rocket tubes with the space equivalent of anti-ship missiles or replace the anti-tank missiles with a larger missile carrying a thermobaric warhead.

The Confederate military also adapted the airframe into a transport variant, the V-46T, which forgoes the missile/rocket armament for an enlarged rear section, larger fuel tanks and reentry-grade armor, allowing it to serve as a troop carrier. Another variant, the V-46B, strips out the cargo space as well, being little more than a cockpit, engines, plus electromagnetic clamps for airlifting a single battleframe or cargo container.

And in case anyone wonders: yes, Rei Inazuma Kicked Ramiel from orbit.
"Lord Sammael, we have finished processing the data acquired through the drone before it was destroyed."

"Speak."

"There is an extensive underground installation located underneath the target area. The drone has confirmed the presence of a Sealing Weapon inside, but the Lilim did not use it against the drone for some reason."

"Perhaps they did not consider it a sufficient threat."

"Maybe, although they did attempt to ambush the drone with a nuclear fission weapon. The drone's self-repair measures counteracted the damage within but a short timeframe, yet it suggests a notable level of intelligence on the locals' part."

"What is the technological development of these Lilim?"

"High end of low. The drone detected numerous spacecraft in orbit around the planet, all of them carrying nuclear fusion power sources. Their general-purpose weaponry seems to be based on a combination of kinetic and explosive weapons, none of which posed any threat to the drone. Inside the underground facility, however, the drone has detected dark energy."

"Dark energy?"

"Indeed, even though their technological development should be insufficient to possess it. We also found a large installation in high planetary orbit with a strong exotic matter signature, along with smaller signatures scattered across major urban areas throughout the planet. The waveforms indicate controlled spacetime manipulation."

"Their level of technology is highly inconsistent. This is most puzzling."

"We also have confirmation of the Angel-scale entity Shamshel reported. Two of these entities working in tandem is what destroyed the drone, despite their offensive capabilities being highly primitive and insufficient for the task."

"How?"

"From what I can tell, one of them triggered the drone's defense protocol on purpose while the other used a spacecraft's assistance to rise into orbit before dropping back down and landing on the drone at terminal velocity. It was a crude tactic, but the drone was not in combat mode at the time and thus did not rate the second entity as a threat until it made contact. Once the drone attempted to maximize its offensive power, the Lilim destroyed its core with a precision attack."

"Are we certain these entities are Lilim?"
"Yes, my Lord. The light of their souls is an exact match."

A pause.

"You have something to say. Say it."

"Shamshel's theory that the Eternal performed Exaltation on the Lilim to create these Angel-scale entities is sound, but... what if the Beast is responsible? And with the Sealing Weapon present, She might be aware of us attacking Her Spawn."

"Do not fear the Beast, Harachel. While the Doors of Guf remain closed, She will sleep Her deathless slumber. Despite our differences, the Eternal taught this to us for a reason. A more pressing concern is the Eternal's intention for this world. Did the drone confirm Tabris' presence?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"He certainly is tenacious to have survived the destruction of his physical body. I could have made use of him."

"He appears to have bonded his soul to an immature Lilim. How the Lilim surprised the process is unfathomable, but its soul is still present and in control of the body. Which brings us to these Angel-scale entities."

"What of them?"

"According to the drone's close-range scans, these entities are at least partially artificial. There are mechanical devices of some kind that are grafted into the creatures' flesh, powered by a dark fusion power source externally attached to the creature's back. The data is confusing, but... it appears that there is an indigenous Lilim inside each creature's largest mechanical device, somehow controlling the creature like a biological vehicle and wielding the creature's power as its own. And yet the creature itself appears to be sentient, even though its soul is... I cannot say for certain. It is as if a Lilim body is carrying a soul that is not that of a Lilim. Yet it is not an Angel either, nor is it like any of the other Spawns. Is... this might be what the Eternal is interested in?"

"Perhaps. We need to know more about these entities. How many are there?"

"Aside from the two active ones, the drone detected three more inside the underground installation. One of them appears to be in the middle of gestation while another is seemingly dormant. As far as I can tell, that is; this is not my area of expertise."

"Forward the data to Bardiel, then. He will know what to do."

Another pause.

"...for the sake of these Lilim, I hope that madman will find nothing... interesting."

"That is none of your concern, Harachel. Do as you are told."

 Geofront, AEL Headquarters
"I've got to hand it to you, Shephard. That was the ballsiest plan I've ever seen."

"I came up with it on the fly, sir."

"I'm not kidding. Sneaking one of those Evangelions out of the city, attaching it to the bottom of the frigate, hauling it up into low orbit, then dropping it right on top of that bastard? And it actually worked? I almost didn't believe it even after seeing it myself."

Shephard just shrugged at Calhoun's image on the monitor. – "Sometimes you just have to think outside the box, sir. We couldn't hurt it any other way and I'd rather not wait around for its next move."

"Good thinking. Some of the generals weren't pleased at that stunt with the nuke, but this should quiet them down. And involving the navy was a smart move, too; they saved some face with this success."

"Speaking of which, kudos to the frigate's navigator and helmsman for nailing the drop trajectory."

"I'll make sure this goes into their files. As for you..." – Calhoun made a gesture of tipping an imaginary hat. – "Keep it up."

"Yes, sir. Do you need a cleanup report?"

"No, I'll let the doctor's crew handle it. Which reminds me, let her know not to bother with the alien. We'll get a tarp there and cover it before the sun comes up. Hopefully this one will dissolve just like the other one and we can sweep up the remains."

Shephard raised an eyebrow in puzzlement. – "Where did you find a tarp large enough?"

"Where do you think? Every sheet in the nearby bases is being stitched together to make one. This is gonna cost us a lot, but at least it's government money, right?"

"Yes, sir." – Shephard then glanced aside and murmured – "Though I'd appreciate it if they'd made sure the AEL is buying real coffee instead of this relabeled decaf crap..." – under his breath before turning back to the screen, where Calhoun was watching with a slightly amused expression. – "Sir. Am I to assume then that the info blackout is still in effect?"

"Yes. To be honest, I think it's a waste of effort to try hiding something that big... but Keel seems to think otherwise. He might be up to something, he might not be; either way, curfew's probably going to lift this afternoon."

Shephard half-expected his superior to remark on his breach of protocol, but being proven wrong was not unexpected either. He knew of Calhoun's reputation: a Black Mesa security guard who somehow escaped the facility against all odds and – if his memoirs were true – even made a short trip to Xen in the process. He was, by all rights, a completely ordinary guy who got caught up in events way above his head and ended up going from nameless corporate security guard to fugitive to partisan to undercover agent to de facto commander of a city-wide uprising. Being made into commander-in-chief of the Confederate Armed Forces wasn't his choice either; the government wanted a war hero to fulfill that post.

Naturally, their first choice was the only person who outdid Calhoun in the war heroics. And outdid him by a large margin. If Barney Calhoun was a legend, Gordon Freeman was a mythical demigod
who inscribed his name into the pages of history before he even reached the biological age of thirty. Shephard had no idea what was true and what wasn't, but the established-as-true facts in the official history books were incredible enough: a shellshocked research assistant with glasses and a dusty, over twenty years old suit of powered armor designed for handling hazardous materials, taking down literally hundreds of Combine troops by himself, blowing up a major military base, wrecking the Combine seat of power on Earth and somehow surviving a nuclear explosion at point-blank range in the process, then blowing up the whole city for good measure and safeguarding a critical data file that ended up saving Earth despite repeated attempts by the Combine to intercept the delivery – all within less than a week of surviving another half a week at ground zero of Second Impact where, in addition to the aliens, an entire brigade of US Marines was personally gunning for him until they got chased off by an even bigger alien force while Freeman merrily gunned down several dozen marines and destroyed multiple tanks and attack helicopters, in addition to whatever alien got into his way, finally capping it all off by traveling to Xen, searching out a house-sized flying alien that could teleport things with its mind and beating said alien to death with a crowbar.

Gordon Freeman was not just a badass. He was a memetic super-badass, eclipsing even Audie Murphy whom Shephard heard about in his youth. And when the Confederacy asked him to be their military commander, he refused it out of hand and went back to his home on the Moon as if to say 'I'm done with this shit'.

Or, as some people suggested, he yearned for a life of seclusion because he couldn't find his place in this new world.

Thus, the Confederacy had to look for someone else and Calhoun accepted... mainly so that they'd stop pestering his old buddy. Shephard didn't know what Freeman was thinking and didn't care all that much. In fact, if one were to ask him what he thought about the man, Shephard wasn't sure he knew what he'd say. While many people borderline worshiped the "One Free Man, the Opener of the Way" even before his actions against the Combine... there was no forgetting that he was the one who started it all, the one who inserted the xenium sample that started Second Impact.

The one who pulled the trigger of the gun pointed at the head of the world.

He was just doing his job, acting on orders from his superiors. Superiors who were only acting on orders from their own superior, whom they warned about the potential consequences of the experiment and who dismissed those concerns for reasons he kept to himself. If anything, Wallace Breen was infinitely more responsible for the world going to hell in that week than Freeman was and Shephard knew that.

He knew Freeman wasn't to blame – yet part of him still wanted to lay blame on the bespectacled theoretical physicist, for lack of anyone else to blame. No matter how many years went past, Shephard could not forget the sight of the dead bodies of his fellow Marines, most of whom he knew personally from boot camp. It becomes much harder to face death when there are names that go with the faces and in Shephard's memories and nightmares, the faces were legion.

He knew the years he spent in that institute were noted in the classified parts of his personnel file. He did not try to hide it; after all, he would've had no need for psychiatric counseling if he hadn't seen anything. PTSD had to come from somewhere and his discharge papers gave him a clean enough bill of mental health to join the military, so there was that.

Of course, there were things that weren't in his file. Such as how he kept waking up screaming in the middle of the night even after Asuka was born, waking her up too more than once (and drawing Kyoko's ire in the process; after all, sleep-deprived toddlers tend to be extra cranky during the day).

Or how he still slept with a gun under his pillow even to this day.
If there was something he saw in his dreams even more often than his fellow Marines, it was *that man*. Even after he was discharged from the asylum, he still caught himself unconsciously following with his eye anyone wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase.

'*...rather than continuously subject you to the irresistible human temptation of telling all, we have decided to... convey you someway you can do no possible harm, and where no harm can come to you. I'm sure you can imagine there are worse... alternatives...'*

Those words, that voice and that disjointed, just plain wrong manner of speech has burned itself deeply into his mind. More than once did Shephard wonder whether he should've just died that day or gotten swallowed up in the Eye of Xen like his family – at least he would've gotten off easy that way.

'*...but there is still the lingering matter of... witnesses, I admit I have a fascination with those who adapt and survive against all odds – they rather remind me of myself, if for no other reason, I have argued to preserve you for a time...'*

He didn't know what *that man's* game was, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know. If it weren't for the vortigaunts, he would still be... wherever the hell *he* put him. No, Shephard was well and truly prepared to take all of his secrets to the grave. Not to satisfy *that man* but because he knew very well he'd be chucked right back into the asylum or worse, get lynched for having been a former member of the Hazardous Environmental Combat Unit, Freeman's famed nemesis from Black Mesa.

Only Kyoko ever knew about him; after all the nightmares and night terrors, he had no choice but to come clean to her about his past. In fact, Shephard had a hunch that her understanding is what kept him sane long enough to marry her. Understanding helped by the fact that she was a scientist and thus had the mindset to analyze his experiences instead of dismissing it as insane rambling.

Understanding which he sorely missed after her death.

Asuka was the only thing that kept him going since then, the only thing that gave his life direction. And Shephard knew that if *that man* showed himself in front of him ever again... there was a full magazine of 9mm bullets with *his* face on it.

When he finished the debriefing and left the office, Yui was waiting for him outside, once more busy with her tablet. – "I trust everything went well?"

"Yeah."

"My offer to get you a permanent office for your sessions with your superiors still stands, colonel."

"I'm not working here, so it wouldn't be fair for your people."

"Fair enough. Is there anything I should know?"

"Yeah. Calhoun says they'll handle the alien's carcass, so don't bother with it."

"Alright. That takes a substantial load off my crew." – She finished her work and looked up at him. – "While you were busy, I was talking with President Keel. He managed to secure financial assistance, which I'm putting to use to expand our operations."

"What's on your mind?"

"First, we're getting Unit-02 operational. It's the final prototype model, optimized and streamlined for mass-production. From here on out, Project Evangelion is basically complete; all we need for full-
scale production now is infrastructure. We still have some R&D avenues we'd like to explore in the meantime and with the extra funding, we can get started as soon as Unit-02 is commissioned.

"Avenues like... what, exactly?"

"Advanced synchronization patterns, software upgrades... mostly these two. In fact, Unit-03 is about to finish its gestation period and reach the point where we can begin full-scale cybernetic augmentation; I'm hoping we can use it as a testbed for whatever we come up with in the meantime. Don't get your hopes up, though; I'm not expecting it to be combat-ready for nearly a year from now."

He nodded. -- "Alright then, let's talk about Unit-02. How soon can you get it working?"

"A month, two at most."

"And the pilot?"

"I'm looking into possible candidates. Nothing you need to worry about." -- Yui replied a bit edgily.

Edginess which Shephard noticed. -- "I'm not worried, I was just asking. Did I do something you're mad about?"

Yui just sighed and started walking, forcing him to follow. -- "No, colonel. It's Rei I'm angry at."

"What did she do?"

"She undertook that orbital drop operation with a cracked rib."

Shephard winced. -- "Yikes. The g-forces were that bad?"

"No. She was already injured when she launched, but is refusing to tell me where she got it. And Sanada also knew about it, but didn't tell me until after the fact."

"Maybe he didn't want you to worry."

"It is his *job* to keep me informed about Rei's health. That's what he gets *paid for.*" -- she retorted.

"And how would've Nagisa wasted that alien by himself?"

"I *know* it was necessary to deploy her, colonel." -- Yui cut him off. -- "That isn't what I'm angry about, it's that they both kept me out of the loop. And as you probably know yourself, a leader is liable to make bad command decisions when acting on faulty knowledge. I'm responsible for every single person within this facility and it's incidents like these that tend to end badly. It's Sanada's job to keep me informed and it's my job to make decisions based on that information. If I had known, I would have swapped the Evangelions and had Nagisa undertake the drop, even if it would've had a higher chance of failure."

"I see your point. How's your girl, by the way?"

"Sanada all but dragged her into the infirmary as soon as she left Unit-00. She's under medical leave until further notice, which Sanada and I jointly decided on."

"Better hurry up with Unit-02, then."

"I have that under control, colonel." -- Yui repeated. -- "Is mister Nagisa at home?"
Chapter rewrite finished on 16/02/27.

There's precedent in canon in the form of Misato that seeing Second Impact from up close is quite the jarring experience and it's not any different here either.

Unlike the exploits of Freeman and Calhoun, Shephard's tale I'm envisioning as a case of "the greatest story never told". Possibly the only thing that makes Shephard any less badass than Freeman is that Shephard was actually a trained soldier by the time of Black Mesa, so he was very, very slightly better prepared. Even so, I figured that an experience like that would leave its mark on anybody, much less someone with only three years of life experience as an adult under his belt.

There is also the very realistic expectation of apprehension. Public opinion about Black Mesa being what it is by 2018, a former HECU member has every right to live in fear of being found out and lynched, or at the very least tried and imprisoned for war crimes he hasn't committed and cannot disprove... human vindictiveness and desire to have someone, anyone, available to be held responsible and punished being a sad reality.
Chapter 26

The abyssal infinity of the universe, far too vast for his limited comprehension, stared down from
every direction at the less than insignificant speck of dust he was, unknowable and uncaring for what
or who he was, unknowable and uncaring for what his senses could or chose to perceive.

Stars streaked past him as the galactic core grew in size until it encompassed his entire field of vision.
Dust and gas enveloped him in a veil that obscured the stars he left behind, more stars appearing and
disappearing in the haze until he beheld it.

A massive disk of blue-hot gas rapidly circling a spherical volume that distorted everything around it,
twin columns of light radiating from the top and bottom of the sphere as the gas clad the sphere itself
in a blue-white halo.

Hundreds of millions of kilometers beyond the accretion disk hung a solitary planet in space,
hundreds of holes in the surface yawning at the colorful sky above them like the compound eye of an
insect.

And from deep within the abyssal darkness, Kaworu felt the gaze of something far more ancient than
his mortal mind could fathom.

A green eye with four pupils stared into his very soul before images flashed in his mind.

He saw himself, perched on a winged, angelic statue in a ruined cityscape. Humming a tune Kaworu
heard in his childhood.

'Music rejuvenates the soul. It's the pinnacle of the civilization born of the Lilim.'

He saw himself, body radiating with an ethereal light as he floated through the air, pillars of white
rock jutting out of a blood red lake underneath him.

'Such is the fate of man... of hope written with sorrow.'

He saw himself, standing naked beneath a dark and airless sky against the backdrop of an Earth with
red oceans, the gray soil around him tainted red from a titanic streak of blood.

'The third yet again, is it?'

He saw himself, decaying walls of crimson-colored metal surrounding him in the darkness as he
gazed up on a starry sky above.

'You would rather have a world of nothingness and abyssal cruelty than to seek change. That is just
who you are.'

He saw himself, gazing across another ruined cityscape before lowering his eyes to the kitten lying
motionlessly at his feet.

'Had you left it, it would have died anyway.'

He saw himself, sitting inside a horrific abomination only vaguely resembling an Evangelion,
unleashing powers he had never seen before while fighting a purple Evangelion in a literal battle
between gods.

'Arrogance and self-worship. You would let worlds burn to light up the pages of human history.'
Wars are interesting... until you have to live in one.'

He saw himself, entry plug starting up around him before he opened his eyes and looked up.

'Evangelion Mark.06... RISE.'

Then darkness befell him before he saw another image.

A titanic spacecraft, long, triangular hull plated in decayed and disintegrating golden-brown armor, large patches missing to expose a skeletal interior. A relic of a long gone era, struggling against but refusing surrender to the test of time.

On the very top of the ship's prow was a chrome silver Evangelion, standing tall like a knight in shining armor, arms crossed before its chest and blond hair falling over its cape from inside a horned helmet shaped almost exactly like the purple Evangelion in that earlier vision, except for a third eye on the forehead, just below the horn. In its hand was the double-shafted red spear Kaworu recognized from his encounter with Shamshel.

On its left stood a entity somewhere halfway between a humanoid skeleton and an insect, clad entirely in dark carapace broken only by the distinctive red orb of an Angel's core on its chest and the Angel's skull-like face on the elongated head. Four spindly arms ended in three-fingered claws, holding an ornate spear with the rear end formed into a double helix not unlike the center part of the double-shafted one Kaworu was already familiar with.

On the silver Evangelion's right stood another Evangelion, one clad in massive armor of white and red and a helmet with six eyes and a knife-like horn. Eight mechanical wings emerged from its back, each radiating iridescent blue particles as the titan floated in defiance of its weight - and in defiance of the weight of the massive cannon hung over its shoulder, that of the equally massive sword in its hands with both edges of the blade wreathed in teal-colored plasma, and that of the various other weapons attached all over its frame.

Around the three were five other Evangelions in a loose formation.

One in red armor with four eyes, a V-shaped helmet and a pair of skirt-like thrusters attached to its legs.

One in blue armor and a horned helmet not unlike the white and red one, albeit with a visor instead of eyes, a long cannon attached to one arm and a twin-bladed sword wielded by the other arm.

One almost identical to the white and red one but in white and blue, shoulder cannon swung up and ready to fire.

One in armor not unlike the red one, but in black and red instead, a pair of enormous leaf-shaped wings attached to its shoulders and pointing sideways, eight rifle-shaped objects with thruster nozzles hanging from its back.

Behind them, an entire army of deep black Evangelions, smaller humanoid machines and spacecraft of various sizes, stretching as far as the eye can see.

Before them, an equally horizon-stretching army of the diamond-shaped drones, broken up by Angels of various sizes and shapes, all thirsting for blood. And behind the Angels, a colossal humanoid made of golden crystalline matter, gleaming in the light of the star it was leaning over to stare down its prey.

'Your entire wretched existence is an affront to ours. An affront I will suffer no longer.'
Kaworu's eyes snapped open to see Rei's head looming above him, hair falling over closed eyes as she sat fast asleep with his head resting on her thigh.

He didn't have many opportunities to see her asleep before – and now that he did, Kaworu saw her in a wildly different light. When awake, Rei's expression was one of control: eyes focused on the center of attention for the calculating mind behind them, facial muscles never even twitching. Almost emotionless, except not quite; more like she just didn't care.

But now, that same face told him differently. Her mouth was still closed but her jaw muscles were relaxed, as were her brows. As much as he could see her brows from the hair fallen over her forehead and eyes, anyway. The overall result was a complete change in her appearance, almost as if she wasn't the same person. She was almost... cute. Kaworu was reminded of that fairy tale he once heard as a child, the one about the Sleeping Beauty, the brave resistance fighter and the Civil Protection officers keeping her locked up and sedated in their guard post. Though he had a lingering suspicion that that wasn't the original format of the story...

Schrödinger was also snuggled up to his side, as the teen belatedly noticed. He didn't quite know why, but the cat wasn't anywhere near as vary of him as most animals. He never really understood that aversion either; he guessed he must've smelled differently or something. In Schrödinger's case, the best guess he had was because the cat's been owned by Rei since kittenhood, so it got used to her smell – and if the two of them really were siblings, they might have smelled alike too.

Kaworu still had some doubts on that front. He didn't want to doubt Rei's words, he just wasn't sure if taking a leap of faith and believing her now would worth a potential disappointment later. Rei certainly did treat him like she treated nobody else. Clinginess in private aside (she joined him in the AEL's locker room showers all the time if no one else was around), she was always nearby, watching her surroundings from behind her shades. Almost as if she was guarding him, even though after that incident with those bullies on his first day, Kaworu didn't get into any more trouble.

That seemed to satisfy Hikari somewhat... but not Asuka, unfortunately. She somehow noticed Rei's behavior and kept pestering him about it with snarky remarks obviously intended to provoke a response. A response Kaworu kept refusing to give her... for now.

As soon as he tried to sit up, Rei's eyes instantly opened and focused on his. – "You are awake now."

"Sorry."

"You do not need to apologize."

He pushed himself off her and sat up for real this time, Schrödinger looking up at him quizzically. – "Like hell I don't. I fell asleep while you were trying to... teach me, I guess."

"I asked of you to calm yourself and empty your mind. It is only natural you would fall asleep. May we continue?"

"Okay, but..."

She raised an eyebrow. – "You have doubts."

"Well, yeah. Numbers are one thing, but I still couldn't get that color right. Pur...ple, was it?"

"Indigo." – Rei corrected.
"Right. And to be honest... I'm not sure I should be reading people's minds."

Rei nodded at his hesitation. – "Respecting mental privacy is not foolish. Yet, if you are able to sense the intent of others, you will be less likely to be caught off-guard. You are already able to sense basic concepts directed at you in particular; what we are attempting to achieve is for you to be able to detect surface thoughts passively, like I do. It will likely take time, but I believe you are capable of it. Do not try to rush it."

Kaworu started to nod when a thought popped up in his head. – "Can you see people's dreams?"

"I am able to tell when a sleeping person is dreaming, but I cannot perceive the contents themselves unless I am actively joining my mind with theirs. You may remember the time when Tabris revealed himself to me; I was doing exactly that." – She bowed her head. – "I belatedly apologize for my violation of your mental privacy."

"So... you didn't see mine just now."

"No. I was asleep myself and unable to pay attention."

Kaworu leaned back with a sigh.

"Tabris." – he asked after a moment.

"What is it?"

"Did you see my dream?"

"I did, but I cannot make any more sense of it than you do. Besides, it's just a dream; you need not care what you see, for it is not reality."

"Or perhaps we should." – Rei added. – "Your brain was in a heightened state of activity when you fell asleep; it might have affected the contents of your dream."

"Yeah. I guess we'll never know."

They spent nearly a minute in silence before Rei spoke up again. – "Have you made your decision whether you wish to stop piloting?"

"I... haven't really thought about it since then, actually." – Kaworu replied with an uncertain shrug. – "I mean, I'm just glad we both got out of it alright."

"You were still worried about my wellbeing."

"Sanada told me you went up with a broken rib. You should've let me go instead."

"I do not mean to offend you, but I am unsure you would have been able to perform the operation. There was no margin for error."

"She's right." – Tabris interjected. – "She's better than you."

"I know that." – Kaworu shot back. – "It's just... it probably hurt like hell."

"Indeed."

"Say no more. I know what it is like to fear for your sibling's wellbeing."
This time it was Kaworu's turn to be surprised. – "You have a sister too?"

"A younger one."

"Do you think... we may have to fight her?"

"No." – Tabris replied immediately. – "**Armisael does not have the stomach for a battlefield. Yet if you do meet her by chance...**" – The Angel's paused before continuing in a quieter, almost growling tone. – "**Turn your weapons on her and I will obliterate your very soul.**"

"Harm him and your life is forfeit." – Rei replied right back without pause.

"**I am glad we understand each other.**" – Tabris remarked with dripping sarcasm. – "**All you need to know is that she is the very reason for my existence in the present moment. But enough of this. I am not here to entertain you with stories.**" – With that, he fell silent.

Rei kept looking at Kaworu silently before she got up and went to her dresser, returning with a sealed envelope she dropped onto Kaworu's lap.

"Take this. If I am killed or otherwise incapacitated over the course of my duties, open it."

"What is it?"

"A key to many answers." – the girl replied cryptically. – "Hide it well, for its contents are meant for you and you only."

"If I read this, Tabris will know too." – he pointed out.

"Acceptable. Do not share it with anyone else, however. In the wrong hands, it may have catastrophic consequences for many. But for now... let us return to your training."

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**Gehirn Industries Automated Mechatronics Research and Development Division**  
Polygonus colony, Proteus system  
3325 hours, local time

"So she just blew you off?"

"Yup. Said I'd need something other than a piece of junk for a car. Never mind I bought it new only three years ago... bitch."

"Man, what's up with chicks these days? All take and no give, like the whole world revolves around them."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

A quiet whirring broke the conversation, both guards going silent and standing straighter as the motorized wheelchair rounded the corner and headed directly for them.

"Morning, sir." – one of the guards said when the wheelchair stopped next to them and turned to face the door.

"Morning." – the occupant of said wheelchair replied absently before snapping his finger at the door. Immediately the card reader chimed affirmative, even though he didn't even bother getting his access card out.
There wasn't much need for it, anyway. Practically every single guard knew his face, so he didn't need to carry credentials. Plus he had complete access to everywhere, thus letting security log his movements was the only reason he would've needed to identify himself – which he just did, in his own way. Said way frequently left new personnel scratching their heads in incredulous confusion as to how he did it, some speculating that the security system had an AI that recognized him. The experienced ones just sighed and decided not to even bother.

As withdrawn as he was, he still found their bafflement amusing.

The automated door lowering shut behind him left him in darkness for a few seconds before he snapped his finger again.

Clicks and whirs of computers starting up sounded from the darkness before rock music came through wall speakers, giant flat displays and hologram emitters coming online to illuminate what the sign outside stated was Private Laboratory A-42, accompanied by a name pretty much no one outside the company knew.

Even though he was pretty much their equivalent of the goose that laid golden eggs.

"Good day, young master." – A three-dimensional figure of a man with slicked-back hair and leather garments decorated with feathers materialized over the nearest hologram emitter. – "Later than usual, if I might add."

"Logistics finished boxing the AEL's A-type equipment, so I thought I didn't need to come in early." – Rolling to the middle of the lab, he reached into a side compartment of his wheelchair and pulled out a pair of gloves with spindly components and wires sticking out all over, sliding them on. Both gloves gave a small chirp before a holographic keyboard materialized in front of him, a password window showing up on the lab's central display. – "Did I get any mail?"

"Two, actually. The first is from Dr. Adler from the Trident team. His people ran the simulations and it seems your prediction about the autobalancer algorithm was right. They're patching it right now, but would like you to double-check whether it can affect the frame's microgravity maneuvering, just in case."

He nodded to himself. – "Alright. Start the sims and load the data, I'll look at it. What about the other mail?"

"It's from your father."

He blanched. – "What is it?"

"'New correspondence from AEL arrived today. Get to it.' That is all."

"...fine. I'll look at Adler's data later."

Tapping his fingers on the ethereal keyboard, he typed in his password before tossing the acknowledgment window aside with a hand gesture. It finally stopped on another display to his side, just behind a hologram emitter displaying a bulky, vaguely humanoid shape with two enormous protrusions reaching directly upwards from its shoulders, along with various diagrams captioned F-type Concept.

"You know, Loki..." – he murmured while reading. – "I'd really appreciate it if they would show me what exactly I'm working with, instead of only telling me the physical dimensions of the mounting points. Would make my job of designing things for it much easier."
"Or maybe you just want to know how someone built a bigger robot than you." – the AI replied dryly.

"I'm serious."

"Of course you are. Would you be that serious when talking to other people, I wouldn't have to sit here listening to you all day."

"Aren't you supposed to be my research assistant?"

"Supposed to? Yes. Actually is? More like your butler. Or babysitter, if you wouldn't be 15."

"Still older than you."

"Har har."

"Now seriously... I can tell roughly what the gear they're having us build go on just by looking at the specifications, but that's not telling much by itself. Like, how they managed to come up with an internal superstructure that can operate at that scale without collapsing under its own weight and what kind of OS they are using to coordinate movements. If I just had one glimpse at the schematics, I could integrate my own designs better."

"Better question is, why do they need our help if they already have the industrial infrastructure to build something like that?" – Loki pointed out. – "If anything, they should be the ones helping us."

"That's presuming they built it themselves instead of outsourcing the frame to someone else. You know, to try to save money."

"That's not how it works."

"I'm an engineer, not an economist!" – He sighed. – "Whatever... let's get this over with."

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Chapter rewrite finished on 16/03/24. Special thanks to Gregg Landsman for his permission to use a certain line from Nobody Dies in this chapter.

This chapter is quite reference-loaded. I promise it will all make sense eventually.
Asuka was, simply put, bored. At this time of the day, she always had to put up with being alone for the simple reason that nobody else was home. Her father at work, that weirdo Nagisa off doing who knows what with his even weirder girlfriend. Well, Asuka did actually have a suspicion what the two could be doing, even though she never actually managed to catch them in the act.

At the same time, Asuka never caught him perving on her either. She knew better than to automatically assume it was because he didn't try, though, so she kept up her guard.

She similarly had no idea what exactly he'd seen in Ikari either. The girl was an attention whore; there was simply no other way to explain the way she dressed and behaved. Or the freaky color she dyed her hair with. She did say it was natural, but there was no way in hell Asuka was actually going to believe that. People simply did not have blue hair. Or gray, for that matter – and considering that Mari claimed Nagisa's hair was already the same color as it currently was when he began attending school, he did not get that habit from Ikari.

Unless he knew her from before. Considering that love at first sight does not exist in the real world, Asuka highly doubted that the two got together in a month. That just cannot happen.

Or maybe they were just that love-starved to latch onto each other like peas in a pod.

While being alone gave her excellent opportunities to perform certain... activities unmolested, that was no way to pass time. Hanging on someone else's neck, be it Mari or Hikari, purely out of boredom was similarly out of the question. Asuka was not quite that shallow or self-important to place herself above someone else's convenience unless it was necessary, as instilled in her by her father. Self-discipline was not something most teenage girls had in ample supply, but Asuka was an exception. After all, if she would whine about every bit of inconvenience and injustice, she wouldn't even make it past boot camp, much less get the military career she aspired for. She still voiced dislike or disagreement, she simply sucked it up and rolled with it like a good soldier. Or at least, she thought that's what a good soldier would do - and whether or not that was true, she'd find it out when she enlists after coming of age.

Right now she was staring at the living room's ceiling trying to think of something while listening to a national TV channel's news broadcast. – "...while it continues to be a certainty that the insurgents are fighting a losing battle against the Confederate military's overwhelmingly vast resources, analysts have once again pointed out that the insurgents continue to maintain home field advantage in the Saudi deserts and that the destruction of this underground command post may drive them to use the local civilian population as human shields. In light of this, the military's leadership once again refused to settle with simple containment measures; no details about their planned actions are currently available."

Asuka merely scoffed in response. Was anyone honestly expecting that any competent armed force would break operations security for propaganda purposes?

Even she knew better and she wasn't even military. Yet.

"In response to growing civil anxiety due to the situation in Tokyo-2, President Keel issued a press
Asuka's head immediately snapped towards the TV.

"He confirmed that the recent events that took place in the past two months were minor engagements between the Confederate Armed Forces and an unidentified hostile force he refused to comment on. He once again asked for cooperation with any and all personnel from the military forces stationed locally since two weeks ago after the nuclear detonation in the countryside near Tokyo-2 caused a mass panic among the populace. He also reassured the public that the situation is under control and that an agency founded in response to last month's attack, provisionally identified by the codename 'Neo-Evolutionary Research and Virology', is actively working to repel these attacks-

Whatever the newscaster had to say about this was interrupted by the apartment's doorbell.

That was definitely unusual. She had no appointments with anyone, so that left three options. Someone interested in Nagisa (she knew his looks gathered him a few fangirls in school), someone looking for her father, or a door-to-door salesman. She already chased away a few from the last category, mostly with threats of violence. It always worked.

With a grumble of annoyance, Asuka nimbly rolled off the couch onto her feet and, after an unsteady stumble from the sudden change in posture messing with her blood pressure, went to answer the door. Maybe if she chased off whoever was outside quickly enough, she mused, she might catch the tail end of that news article. Worth a try.

Yet when she unsealed the door and opened up, what she saw wasn't what she expected. '...scratch options no. 1 and 3.'

"Asuka Langley Shephard?" – asked the woman in a white labcoat, two men in suits flanking her on either side.

"Uhm... if you're looking for dad, he's still at work. Come back later."

"Your father works for me; I know exactly where he is right now." – the woman replied immediately, in a no-nonsense tone. – "No, I'm looking for you."

"Me...?"

"It is a sensitive matter. We should discuss this inside."

"No way." – Asuka said immediately. – "I don't even know who you are, much less who you claim to be."

"Dr. Yui Ikari, Artificial Evolution Laboratory chairwoman." – the woman replied, expertly flipping a business card out of her pocket. – "If you wish, I can give you time to double-check my identity online."

Asuka looked over the card. Not that she ever saw an authentic one, so she wouldn't be able to tell. "I, uh... don't think that's necessary. What are you looking me for?"

"Like I said, we should discuss this inside. My colleagues will stay outside, as this doesn't concern them."

Asuka weighed her options. That woman was obviously influential if she managed to find one specific person in a city. At least, that's what she thought until her brain clicked. 'Wait, Ikari?' And
that's when she noticed the facial resemblance too. 'Oh, fuck.'

"F-fine."

She stepped aside to let Yui in but in the meantime, Asuka's brain was working on overdrive.

'What is she doing here?! Why is she looking for me?! I didn't do anything!'

Aside from her little nighttime expedition in the middle of what the president just confirmed was a warzone, but she doubted Yui would know about that. Her father certainly didn't, which was a miracle. After what she saw, Asuka's brain was so confused and overwhelmed that she didn't pay attention to where her feet were taking her. It was only once she was lying on her bed that she realized she should've gone back to the shelter instead of home but after a momentary confusion, she mentally told the issue to commit an anatomically impossible act and went to sleep. By the time she woke up, the curfew was already over and Nagisa was out like a light in the next room. Luckily, neither he nor her father bothered to look into her room while she wasn't supposed to be there, so Asuka lied that she came back on her own when the curfew ended and no one questioned it.

After a few days, she even stopped fretting of being found out. She didn't get hurt, so what would be the big deal in belated punishment anyway?

In any case, the guards stayed outside like Yui promised. That was a start. Asuka was certain she could take down one untrained adult with the CQC training her father gave her, but three with two possibly trained? She'd rather not take those chances if she could help it, especially with those two blocking the only escape route. But if they tried to have liberties with a soon-to-be-fourteen year old girl, said soon-to-be-fourteen year old would make damn sure they would piss blood for a while afterwards.

But for now, with Yui sitting at the kitchen table opposite of her, nothing of the sort seemed necessary. Not that Asuka wouldn't knee another girl in the crotch; she once applied such a love tap to an older girl who tried to pick on her, with said girl doing a rather convincing impression of a banshee as a result.

"So... are you going to tell me now why you're looking for me?"

"You're not double-checking my identity?" – Yui asked back.

"Your daughter is my classmate. I recognized you from her."

"Good observation and I know the two of you are classmates. So is mister Nagisa."

Yet more surprises. Asuka wondered how much more she'd have before the end of what was, so far, a boring day.

"How do you know him?"

"Just like your father, mister Nagisa works for me."

And yet more surprises. Asuka actually found herself starting to miss the boredom.

"Works for you? What is he, your janitor?"

"No. Something quite more important than that. Which is why I'm here, actually." – Yui opened the folder she was carrying and started to browse the contents. – "Miss Shephard, I understand you're a trained battleframe pilot?"
Asuka instantly went to alert. – "What makes you think that?"

"I have my sources." – Yui remarked with a smirk. – "Multiple champion titles in the junior battleframe league under the alias Red Baron, currently tied for highest number of victories with Musashi Lee Strassberg, alias Nineball."

"The identities of all pilots in the league are classified." – the teen replied, eyes narrowed in suspicion. – "Even I didn't know Nineball's name. How did you get this information?"

"Like I said, I have my sources."

"Did my father tell you?"

"No. He doesn't even know that I know, or that I am here. I sought you out entirely of my own initiative."

"For what?"

Yui shifted in the chair. – "It is exceedingly rare for a civilian with no direct affiliations to the military to have extensive experience in battleframe combat using a Mk-III/B. It is even rarer to have skill comparable to yours. I have seen the publicly available footage of your matches and while I am not an expert, you are an exceptional pilot I believe the military will be quite eager to have. But they do not have you yet, which presents me with a unique opportunity."

Asuka exhaled through the nose. That most definitely didn't sound like the candyman type of flattery, which alleviated her suspicions somewhat. – "Go on."

"Your ability and lack of affiliations makes you a rather valuable individual. I am here because I have a job offer for you."

"What job offer? What is it you people even do?"

"Biotechnology."

"Then I have no idea what you need a battleframe pilot for. Aside from as a trophy, in which case I refuse."

She did have her pride, after all.

And reputation. Secret reputation, but still reputation.

"I am not finished yet." – the adult continued. – "There is an opening I believe you would be ideally suited to. It is not the first time I'm hiring someone specifically for this position, but I have been thinking for a while now to hire someone with experience in a relevant field in order to perform comparative studies." – Yui then took a few documents out of her folder. – "No doubt you are confused what a company like mine could possibly want from you. I can explain more if you are interested, but I need you to sign this non-disclosure agreement first."

"Corporate secrets?" – Asuka guessed.

"National security." – Yui replied, slightly amused at the girl's deer-in-headlights look at that. – "Which is why I could make this offer in the first place. I have President Keel's personal authorization to hire any and all civilian personnel at my own discretion, including underage persons. Though I am aware that you will turn fourteen next month and therefore become legally eligible for employment; this merely expedites the process."
"Oooookay... that sounds reasonable." – Asuka said slowly. 'Presidential authorization?! Small fish, she ain't.' – "And you say my old man works for you?"

"Correct. My company is the one he is observing as per his current orders, as well as an unofficial consultant for matters involving this position. If you accept, he will be your unofficial superior; officially, you work directly under me." – The adult then leaned slightly forward. – "I have to inform you, though, that due to... circumstances, this line of work is not entirely safe. You will receive hazard pay and may resign at any time."

Asuka was deep in thought. Hazard pay meant danger to life and limb, which meant she wasn't being offered a research job. Handling hazardous materials? She was certified for battleframes, not HEV suits. Granted, nobody made HEV suits for children, but still. And even if they needed heavy lifting, any civilian could be trained to use a civilian frame. But from the sound of it, this woman wanted someone with actual combat experience for "comparative studies" of some kind. And "relevant", to boot.

'What kind of laboratory researches stuff that needs a battleframe pilot?'

Then it was as if a switch was flipped in her brain.

Laboratory.

Research.

Artificial Evolution Laboratory.

Neo-Evolutionary Research and Virology.

Military contractor fighting a hostile force.

A huge, humanoid battleframe silhouetted against blinding brightness.

'...oh, you have got to be shitting me.'

She still hazarded the question. – "What is this job, anyway?"

Yui smirked. – "Test pilot."

END OF PART 1

VOICE CAST

Kaworu Nagisa – Akira Ishida
Rei Ikari – Megumi Hayashibara
Asuka Langley Shephard – Yuko Miyamura
Yui Ikari – Atsuko Tanaka
Adrian Shephard – Katsuyuki Konishi
Adam – Tôru Furuya
Lilith – Yumi Tôma
Tōji Suzuhara – Tomokazu Seki
Kensuke Aida – Tetsuya Iwanaga
Hikari Horaki – Junko Iwao
Mari Makinami – Maaya Sakamoto
Chapter rewrite finished on 16/04/13.

It is worth noting that Yui is not following the traditional Japanese etiquette for presenting a business card. If she would, she would present it with both hands, holding it by the upper corners and the side with her name and rank on it upwards and towards Asuka so that she can read it; also by etiquette, Asuka would be required to accept it with both hands, hold it by the lower corners and read it before verbally acknowledging having received the card and bowing, at no point covering the information with a finger or putting the card in her pocket, such disrespectful behavior being seen as indicative of how she'd treat Yui. However, since Asuka is a gaijin and Yui knows it, Yui can reasonably assume that Asuka is not familiar with meishi etiquette and cannot be expected to know the appropriate response, so Yui cuts her some slack. Against another Japanese, this way of presenting a business card would be quite offensive.

While popular opinion claims that a powerful blow to a man's genitals produces debilitatingly powerful pain to the point of instant, prolonged incapacitation (which I can personally attest to, courtesy of an overenthusiastic three years old nephew's flailing feet when I picked him up, with the pain persisting for upwards of fifteen minutes and radiating out all the way to the kidneys in slight, pulsing waves of agony that reflexively impaired movement – for those who haven't experienced it yet and don't feel the need to), the truth of the matter is that it works on women too. While they have no external bits and thus the target area is smaller, said target area is literally the most sensitive part of a woman's body, with lots of nerve endings. Strike it from the right angle and with enough force, and they will scream bloody murder and collapse in a quivering heap all the same. While I understandably cannot and would not test this, from experiencing the male version I can safely assume that comparing it to unlubricated gangrape is a major understatement. And no, this is no exaggeration – it really does hurt that much.

For those not familiar with Eva's expanded universe, Musashi is a character from Girlfriend of Steel. He's a teenage Trident test pilot in the same JSSDF unit as Shinji's sweetheart Mana Kirishima and deserts at one point out of anger at him and his fellow pilots being constantly bullied by the adult soldiers and their superiors not letting them leave the unit due to knowing too much, stealing his Trident in the process. He ultimately comes out of hiding when Gendo uses Mana as bait to draw him out and engages the Evas to free her; when the JSSDF launches an N2 mine at his Trident to keep it out of NERV's hands, Musashi uses his ejection capsule to launch Mana out of the blast radius. In one of the endings, Shinji asks Mana about Musashi's fate and she confirms that Musashi was killed in the blast which literally melted his Trident down into a puddle of molten metal and totaled both Unit 01 and Unit 02.

For those who are newly getting into the story, it is also available for read on Spacebattles, Sufficient Velocity and Fanfiction.net. If you have an account on SB or SV, I'm available to answer any
questions you have, along with providing supplemental information not present in either in-story exposition or in chapter notes. I will also privately answer any reviews I get here, so ask away.

If the nature of your question requires it, I am also willing and able to spoil about what's ahead. I can't give you a chapter-by-chapter breakdown, but the majority of the plot is already set in stone with details. I can say, however, that I am taking this story in a direction no NGE of HL fanfic ever touched, something that goes beyond the context of either source universe and ends up as more than a sum of its parts. I guarantee that everything will make sense down the line.
Chapter 28

Tokyo-2, Outer District 8
November 21, 2041

It was an apartment building just like all the others around it, without any special distinguishing feature. Yet those who lived in the vicinity knew what made it not-so-ordinary and avoided it if they could. For those who actually lived inside, that obviously wasn't an option, so they simply tried to make their time in the corridors when going and leaving home as short as possible. Nothing happened so far that warranted it... but when it came to those very nice people, one could never know.

Said very nice people did nothing to discourage this line of thought either. Why would they have done it? It kept outsiders from butting into things not their business.

Thus it was that the two Asian men standing guard at a certain upper-floor apartment's door were rather bemused when a blue-haired teenage girl in a long, black coat and shades walked out of the stairwell and headed right for them with purpose in her steps.

"What do we have here?" – one of the guards murmured when she stopped in front of them.

"I wish to speak with your employer." – Rei stated, plain as day.

"What for?"

"Business."

"Yeah, right." – the other guard scoffed. – "Go run back home, princess."

"I said I wish to speak with your employer." – she repeated.

"And I said go back home before you get hurt. Do you even know who we work for?"

"That is why I am here."

The two men shared a look for a long moment before the first one slightly gestured downward with his head. His colleague briefly exhaled through his nose before shrugging and replying with a 'go ahead' gesture.

Behind her shades, Rei's eyebrow inched upwards ever so slightly.

"If you want it so badly..." – The guard who initiated the silent exchange pushed himself away from the wall and walked around her from the left, stopping at her right to slowly draw an index finger down her side. – "...I think we might be able to arrange something."

Without a twitch, Rei's eyes shifted in his direction a second before her hand shot up lightning-fast and grabbed him by the wrist. The man had no time to react before she yanked on his hand, sending him tumbling forward – at precisely the right angle to have his forearm intercepted by her knee and snapped in two with a wet crack that was immediately drowned out by his howl of agony.

The other one immediately reached for his concealed weapon, but had no chance to draw it before Rei launched herself into a leap, her entire body twisting around in mid-air before she let loose a roundhouse kick that connected with the side of his head with enough force to launch him several
meters away. Yet without stopping her momentum, Rei planted her other foot on the wall and kicked herself off without even touching the ground, flipping over mid-flight to plow into her first victim's face boots-first, sending him down to the ground as well.

The still-uninjured guard barely managed to regain awareness of his surroundings from having been kicked in the head when Rei walked up to him, planted her boot on his chest and leaned so far forward that their faces almost touched. – "Your employer, if you will."

Twenty minutes later, Rei deftly flipped her cellphone open as she walked out of the building. – "A meeting has been arranged."

"Any problems?" – Kaworu asked on the other end.

"Nothing worth your concern."

"How about the ones not worth my concern?"

The corner of Rei's mouth snuck a millimeter higher. Her brother evidently knew not to take everything others said at face value. That was good. While most people would feel shame at their deception attempts being discovered, Rei instead felt a small tinge of pride. Not at herself, but at her kin's perceptiveness.

Besides, she would've told him the truth anyway.

"Minor resistance from his bodyguards. No fatalities. Will not affect negotiations."

He sighed. – "I hope so."

"Have you informed the others?"

"Not yet. I'll do it tomorrow."

"Are you certain they are trustworthy?"

"We'll see. I mean, baiting someone into doing something illegal for the sole purpose so that you can report them to the authorities? I'm pretty sure that's illegal too. Anyway, what did you agree on?"

"Negotiations will commence on the 29th of next month, 1700 hours. The involved parties will meet personally."

"You want me to be there too?!"

The amount of alarm in his voice was not inconsiderate. A very small part of Rei, a part she didn't even know existed until her brother suddenly walked back into her life, wondered if she truly made the right choice... but Rei silenced it. It had to be done. There were, are, and will be, things she cannot teach him through words alone. He needs to experience them himself in order to be prepared for everything in life.

And to prepare him for that was a responsibility Rei would not entrust to anyone.

"I will handle the actual negotiation. You are merely required to give the final say."

In some way, she considered herself lucky. Plowing the land means nothing if it's a lifeless desert – and Kaworu's mind wasn't a desert. He wasn't a naive child who could see nothing but good in the people around him, nor a fearless fool who jumped into everything without restraint or care for the consequences, nor a hapless coward who couldn't muster the will to strive for the betterment of
himself and those around him. He was a realist with a solid grasp on the world around him, honed by years of hardship, loneliness and depending on himself and himself alone.

In that way, he was unintentionally shaped the same way Rei intentionally shaped herself. She could work with that.

"...fine. Where?"

"The meeting point is being selected. I will inform you in due time."

As she slipped her phone back into her pocket, Rei wiped the fresh layer of snow off her bike's seat. It was about the time of the year when she had to start digging out the snow chains soon if she wanted to keep using the vehicle, considering that the naturally humid local climate combined with Second Impact's climate changes meant that Japan saw absolutely brutal snowfall each year. Rei still remembered the time when she was an elementary schooler and opened her apartment building's outer door to go to school one morning... only to face a wall of snow taller than she was at the time with a door imprint in it, all of which had fallen overnight. It took the military over a week and several fatalities to dig the city out, no thanks to the sound of their heavy lifting machinery triggering a minor avalanche on one of the hills around the city that wrecked a significant chunk of their infrastructure and re-buried the primary motorway leading into the city, setting their work back to zero.

Rei herself spent that week alone, huddled up on her bed and staring at the whiteness in her window. It was a small comfort when Yui finally got home as soon as the Geofront's elevator access was dug out of the snow. Small, but still a comfort - especially since as her adoptive mother hugged her, Rei felt that the woman's worry for her was genuine.

How ironic was it, then, that Kaworu's oldest recalled memory was about snow, even though it wasn't the same winter.

In a way, Rei was still in an emotional turmoil over him. She knew what she expected herself to feel: anger at Yui for lying to her and anger at herself for believing that lie instead of checking the woman's mind. Yet that anger failed to materialize, for one simple reason: Yui fully, genuinely believed what she told Rei back then. Even if it wasn't true, Yui still believed it was true and acted on that belief when she passed it on.

And since she did not intentionally deceive Rei, Rei was at no fault for believing Yui either.

For the first time in her life, Rei felt at a loss about herself. She wanted to be angry, to blame someone, but there was no one to be angry at, no one to blame. Retribution had to be sought for the hardships her brother went through while she was all nice and comfy in a high-earning household, but her wrath lacked a target. Despite her outwardly calm demeanor, inwardly the girl was on the verge of exploding from not being able to vent her frustration. Nonlethal violence against those two was cathartic, but not nearly enough.

It was almost enough to make her wish for another Angel to appear right now for her to kill.

Killing is what she existed for, after all.

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*Geofront, AEL Headquarters*

*1807 hours*

"Oh, thank god our shift's over..." – Maya sighed, leaning back on the cafeteria's loungers.
"You want to go home that badly?"

Maya accepted Hyuga's offered bottle of water before replying. – "Whoever actually likes to work is an idiot, but we all have to eat."

"And you gotta have fun sometimes." – Aoba pitched in, taking another bottle from Hyuga and taking a sip.

"That too. Night shift can take it from here; I'm beat."

Hyuga sat down onto the lounger's remaining free room. – "We got a lot of new equipment recently. You guys have any idea what it's for?"

"No. Though I wouldn't put it past the boss to be up to something shady." – Maya muttered.

"Like what?"

"Have either of you ever been down to Sector T?"

"Not me." – Aoba quipped, taking another sip.

"Me neither." – Hyuga added. – "You seen the kind of security at the access elevator, didn't you?"

"The cameras or the triple-level biometric identification?" – Maya asked back.

"Both."

She pushed herself back up to a proper sitting position. – "I actually looked up that section's cabling map and the cameras are wired directly into the MAGI instead of the security division. You remember that big alarm last year?" – Both men nodded. – "That was tripped by one of the cameras going offline because of a malfunction. But get this: the MAGI also actively logs everyone who uses the elevator."

Hyuga just shrugged at that. – "Everyone checks in when they come in. What's so special about that?"

"Because according to the logs, nobody ever goes down there."

"So?"

"You don't get it? There's an access log for the elevator, but there's only one or two actual accesses per year. Nothing else. No scientists, no technicians, no security, not even maintenance. And according to maps, that is the only personnel entrance down there."

"What about the cargo elevator?"

"It hasn't been fired up for years." – Maya paused before continuing. – "You see it now? There's a whole sector with restricted access, but not even authorized people go in or out."

"I seem to remember that some of the initial R&D on Evangelions was done there. Like, very early stuff."

"Yes, but all of it is done up here now and all the data is in the MAGI." – she pointed out. – "There's no logical reason for it to be secured so heavily. So then, why the security?"

"I wouldn't worry about it." – Aoba piped in once more, looking not the least bit interested in her
"Easy for you to say." – Maya shot back. – "You never worry about anything."

"What's the deal, anyway? Does it get in the way of your job or something?"

"No."

"Then don't think about it. I too heard those rumors about things behind the scenes, but thinking about it gets you nowhere. And talking about it gets you in trouble. So don't worry so much."

Maya was about to open her mouth and retort when a voice all three of them knew very much beat her to the punch.

"That is a commendable attitude, mister Aoba."

The trio's heads immediately snapped around to see Yui taking her own bottle of water from the vending machine. It was a sight all three were wholly unused to: outside tests, they almost never saw their boss whatsoever, much less see her doing something so mundane. Yet as much as she tended to hole up in her office all day, Yui was still a human and as such, evidently had needs to attend to.

Not that if she wouldn't be a human would that fact be changed, seeing as vortigaunts didn't live off sunlight either and even the dreaded shu'ulathoi needed their bodysuits to keep their bodies operational – to say nothing of the Evangelions' massive nutrient intake, even with their mostly stationary lifestyle.

For her part, Maya felt more than a little apprehensive; after all, her boss just overheard her talking rather animatedly about the one area of the facility she had absolutely no business with.

Fortunately for her, Hyuga seemed to have figured out her predicament and immediately enacted damage control.

"Ma'am, we got the memo about Unit-02's activation test this Saturday."

"Good." – was all Yui replied.

"Does that mean we have a pilot?"

"Indeed... and I hope miss Shephard will be able to perform as expected of her."

The trio shared a look between each other.

"I'm guessing this has something to do with why the lieutenant colonel looked so upset recently...?" – Hyuga asked slowly.

"Correct on that count as well. But while I may have taken him on as a military consultant, adjustment and allocation of human resources is not within his jurisdiction. His daughter has the skill set we need right now and I intend to use her. That is all there is to it. He has every right to be upset, but I will not lose an asset and compromise our work because of his personal feelings." – Yui suddenly turned towards the three. – "Have you finished going over the documentation of the new gravimetric array the military will begin installing next week?"

"I, uh... I'm only halfway through." – the man admitted, slightly sheepish but not enough to appear unprofessional.

"Then get it done by the end of your shift." – With that, Yui turned to leave.
"Ma'am? Our shifts just ended."

Yui paused in her step.

"...indeed. My mistake. Carry on, then."

As she resumed walking away and left earshot range, Hyuga was the one who broke the semi-stunned silence. – "Did... she just apologize?"

"Nope, she didn't." – Aoba replied.

"No, she definitely did."

"No, she only said she made a mistake. She didn't say the S word, ergo she didn't apologize for said mistake." – Aoba pointed out. Without waiting for a response, he walked away towards the personnel locker rooms, casually dropping his empty water bottle into the trashcan he walked past without slowing his pace.

Behind his back, Hyuga and Maya shared a silent look before the latter motioned at Aoba's back with her head and mouthed 'grammar Nazi', eliciting a barely-repressed snicker from the former as they followed him.

Shu'ulathoi is the vortigaunt name of the entities that function as the Combine's leadership caste, referred to by humans as Advisors. The entity in question resembles a white-skinned slug (hence the 'slugfucker' slang term applied to collaborators) the size of a large motorcycle, with all of it except for the 'face' covered in a form-fitting dark green bodysuit that makes them capable of surviving on Earth without life support machinery after a short adaptation period. No limbs or other external features are present, not even eyes (whose function are fulfilled by a small camera implant on the front); it does, however, have a small orifice on its face through which it can extend a long, flexible tentacle that can strike hard enough to break a human skull and is implied to be somehow capable of patching into the victim's nervous system and acquire their knowledge in a split second. They also have a pair of spindly robotic arms extending from their bodysuit.

What makes shu'ulathoi exceedingly dangerous despite their lack of natural weaponry is their overwhelmingly powerful psychic powers. Aside from being capable of inducing hallucinations accompanied by debilitating headaches, their telekinetic power allows them to float and move around deceptively quick for something of their size, immobilize multiple targets by suspending them in mid-air, crush metallic objects with no visible effort whatsoever and casually snap a person's spine in two. They are not, however, invulnerable, with sufficient pain being capable of disrupting their concentration enough to interfere with their powers.

For those familiar with the X-COM universe, be it the original or the reboot, shu'ulathoi are basically the local equivalent of an Ethereal but altered to a far more radical extent to the point where they are little more than flying brains with just enough other tissue to hook life support machinery into. They are utterly dependent on technology for their continued existence and on their slave races to do the actual fighting.

It is unknown how many shu'ulathoi arrived on Earth during and after the Seven Hour War, but a significant number of them were present on the Prime Citadel in City 17, the Combine's planetary capital. When the Prime Citadel was destroyed during the Great Revolution, the shu'ulathoi escaped on self-propelled, biomechanical-looking pods that carried them to a safe
distance while simultaneously incubating them for Earth's environment. For the purposes of this story, I'm positing that a shu'ulathoi's bodysuit utilizes nanotechnology to break down bodily waste at the atomic level and restructure it back into nutrients that are then injected back into the creature, with the required energy to do so (in accordance with conservation of energy, since the chemical energy metabolism extracts from nutrients to harness for biological functions gets used by the body and thus will not be present in bodily waste, ergo an external supply is required) being harvested from the ambient environment through the bodysuit's contact surface with said environment, like a full-body, full-spectrum solar panel. While it may sound not entirely possible with what we currently know about physics and chemistry, keep in mind that the shu'ulathoi (for the purposes of this story) are literally hundreds of millions of years old; the only reason they aren't Vorlon levels of advanced yet is because they have no need to advance further when their current technology is sufficient to grind down any resistance with sheer industrial output.
Chapter 29

Tokyo-2, Outer District 6  
November 23, 2041  
1435 hours

Asuka didn't consider herself a fashion monger, yet she still had a mirror on her desk. There was always the bathroom mirror to use, but there was no point in monopolizing a common room whenever she felt like it if it could be avoided. Besides, her room was hers and hers alone; what she chose to furnish or not furnish it with was nobody else's business.

Of course, the mirror wasn't merely for decoration. Girls had to take care of their appearance, after all, especially those with natural beauty like her. She wasn't unblemished, but there was nothing on her that required makeup to hide either; that bruise at her hairline where her skin got split open by the reflex sight of an improperly-held rifle she fired as a child was completely unnoticeable unless one swept her hair aside and looked directly at it.

As she slowly took her fingertip away from her eye and blinked, Asuka's gaze left her mirror image and lingered upon the golden ring on her desk, the thin chain it was strung onto quietly rustling as she picked it up and ran her fingers over it.

She heard the doorbell ring and her father answering it, but didn't move to go see who it was. After all, either it was the person they've been expecting or someone they had no time to deal with right now.

Only when she heard her father's footsteps behind her room's door did she look up.

"Asuka."

"Coming."

Closing the case for her contact lenses, Asuka got up and strung the chain around her neck, tucking the ring securely beneath her neckline. Despite knowing exactly what was going on (this time), she couldn't help but feel anxious.

It was, as her father tended to say and Asuka tended to follow suit in saying, showtime.

She wasn't surprised to find Rei in the kitchen, standing in the corner with her blue hair and all-black getup looking like a punk raven. Not that Asuka didn't secretly find it badass, it just wasn't her color scheme of choice.

Granted, her preferred color would've made it look nothing if not pretentious... or as ghastly as those images of cosplayers Mari showed her. She liked her hair blonde, not an obviously unnatural shade of bright red that would put a tomato to shame, thank you very much.

Narrowly missing Rei raising an eyebrow behind her shades, Asuka's attention was focused on her father who was stuffing the car keys into his pocket. – "Ready to go?"

"Yeah. Is she going to show the way or something?"

"No, it's the same road I always use. She was going in anyway, so I thought I'd give her a ride." – Shephard replied before walking back into the apartment.
"Are we going?" – Asuka called in after him while putting her (thankfully snow-proof; her father warned her ahead of time) shoes.

"Just a minute."

What she didn't expect was Shephard returning with Kaworu in tow, the latter clad in a one-size-too-small sweater and one-size-too-big boots, both of which looked as if they had seen better days. Consequently, he looked like a bum.

Asuka didn't really care. If he happened to go somewhere at the same time they also left, all the better. At least he wasn't leaving together with them; she most definitely preferred not being seen in public together with him right now.

At least, that's what she thought until he got into the car with them.

At that point, Asuka mentally updated her guess that wherever Kaworu was going, it was at least partly in the same direction. Consequently, her father was giving him a lift so that he won't have to spend as much time in the cold with the questionable protection provided by his clothing.

That assessment started looking somewhat uncertain once the car entered a tunnel and Asuka could still see Kaworu in the seat behind her when looking into the rearview mirror (her father was driving the car, not his, so damn straight she had the front seat).

Of course, once the car left the bottom of the tunnel to reveal the expanse of the Geofront beyond the heavily reinforced guardrail at the edge of the road (it was a multi-kilometer drop beyond, after all), Asuka's attention was suddenly focused elsewhere. Sure, she had seen artificial biodomes before, but nowhere even remotely near this size and never underground.

But no distractions last forever.

"You don't seem very interested in the view, Nagisa. Have you been down here before?"

"Ah... sorta." – the teen replied in a slightly uncomfortable tone. Asuka narrowed her eyes in suspicion and while she didn't demand him to elaborate, she wasn't going to let the subject drop either.

It was when they got out of the car and arrived to what was obviously a security checkpoint that she decided enough was enough and faced him directly.

"Alright, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask the same question from you, actually." – Kaworu replied, digging into his pocket for something. – "As far as I'm aware, you don't work here."

"And you do?"

"Actually, yeah." – He pulled out an access card.

Asuka glanced at him with an expression of undisguised skepticism before glancing sideways at Shephard. – "Is he lying?"

"No, he's not."

"What is he, then? Janitor?"
"Same as you."

"...you're shitting me."

"No."

"You are shitting me."

"No, I'm not."

"You mean to tell me that this company recruited a **HOBO** as test pilot for a super-secret project?!"

"Hey!" – Kaworu complained, but nobody paid him any attention.

"He was already here when I came in." – Shephard pointed out in a tone somewhere between 'don't look at me like that, it's not my fault' and 'quit whining, I can't do anything about it'. – "You'll have to ask the boss for the how and the why. Speaking of which..." – He fished out two access cards from his own pocket, one of which he gave to Asuka. – "Your passcard. Don't leave this at home when you come in because the paperwork's a nightmare."

"I'll keep that in mind."

At the gate, Asuka paused and glanced in Kaworu's direction. Their eyes met for a moment before she shook her head and swiped the card through the reader.

'**What were they thinking...?**'

"This way."

"Briefing room?"

"Locker room. From there we shall proceed directly to the hangars."

Asuka hurried after Rei, her father having broken off the group a while ago. Kaworu was still with the girls, though thankfully quiet.

"What's your job here, anyway? Are you an adjutant?" – the blonde asked, catching up.

"I am a test pilot as well."

"How many test pilots do you guys have?!"

"You are the third. One for each operational Evangelion."

"...oh. Okay."

When they reached the locker rooms, Asuka was about to snidely ask Kaworu if he wanted to follow them in but just as she opened her mouth, he went through a separate doorway – likely the men's locker room.

Oh, well. At least he knew his place... for now.

While undressing, Asuka's eyes wandered towards Rei. With winter coming, school PE classes switched back to indoor activities – which meant no swimming classes. Which, in turn, meant no catching a peek at other girls while changing.
It's not as if Asuka had many opportunities to peek before arriving to Earth, offworld schools with pool facilities being as rare as they are. Swimming classes are anything but important on planets with no oceans, seas, lakes or rivers – in fact, from what she heard, there were talks in the ministry of education about amending the national curriculum with survival classes concerning sealing EVA suit breaches and maintaining self-control under stress to optimize oxygen usage during an emergency.

In any case, Asuka never really looked at Rei in particular in the locker room before, as she either was absent or there were lots of other eye candy. Now there was no such distraction and the blonde took advantage of that fact.

The contrast with the usual image was like the one between day and night. The girl's skin was incredibly pale, almost white; as if she had never been touched by sunlight in her life. Not that the girls Asuka had seen offworld were different – even on Polygonus, where the mild enough climate to go suntanning was offset by the fact that the planet received practically zero UV radiation from its red dwarf star –, but Rei went beyond even that. Then there was the fact that her body looked as if it was copied straight off a sculpture: not a single bone jutting out, not a single fat pad out of place. In fact, it was barely visible but the girl was definitely muscular beyond her age, especially the legs.

And even from this angle behind her, Asuka could tell that Rei was most definitely second only to Mari in the class when it came to chest size.

All in all, Asuka had to admit it: Rei had an absolutely killer body. One way beyond everyone in the class. Which raised the question: why the all-concealing getup? Why hide all that?

Maybe she got tired of chasing off boys all the time?

Whatever the case, it left the blonde deeply envious.

"So... which one of you is the senior pilot?"

"Me." – Rei replied, unfolding something white. – "I have been working here for several years."

"And him?"

"He is still a novice."

Asuka turned her attention back to the vacuum-sealed package in her locker. – "Is this some kind of undersuit for the g-suit?"

"That will be your pilot suit."

"This?" – Asuka practically exploded in exasperation, ripping open the package to confirm that the bodysuit in question not only looked thin, it was thin. – "This is barely anything! How is this going to stop me from splattering all over the cockpit? Or is this some kind of preliminary equipment because you don't have military-issue g-suits?"

"You will not require a g-suit." – Rei stated calmly, slipping her arms into the sleeves of her own suit.

"Ahem. Again: how is this going to keep the pilot alive when the action starts?"

Rei closed the vacuum seals around her neck. – "Upon insertion, the entry plug is filled with breathing fluid that also acts as a shock dampener. Due to the amount of g-forces inherent to an Evangelion performing combat maneuvers, this was the only method deemed effective enough to guarantee pilot survival without a decrease in combat efficiency."
Asuka visibly gulped at that. – "So... I'm going to be breathing water?"

"No. It is a synthetic fluid containing an iron-based compound structurally similar to hemoglobin. Your lungs can process it as if it was air."

"Is that why they're having us dress in glorified swimsuits? To minimize fluid resistance while moving around?"  

"Indeed."

1549 hours

For his part, Kaworu felt slightly bored. Usually, Rei was waiting for him in the corridor by the time he finished donning his plugsuit – but this time, he found himself getting there first. He guessed Rei was helping Asuka getting her plugsuit on for the first time.

For his part, he also didn't know what to think when a visibly irate Shephard told him about the girl being his newest colleague. Kaworu wasn't naive: if it wasn't for the man's evident dissatisfaction with it, he would've immediately suspected nepotism. Yet from what he could deduce and have Rei confirm, Yui apparently went around Shephard and handpicked Asuka personally. For what reason, he didn't know.

At the same time, part of him felt ambivalent about it. The girl was confrontational, arrogant and talked down to him all the time, yet at least now he wasn't the only rookie on the team and thus wouldn't be under as much pressure as before to not screw up.

At least he hoped so.

"Are you kidding me?!" – That outburst was so loud he could actually hear it through the door. No guessing who it was, either.

"I am not." – came Rei's almost inaudible reply, close to the door. Which then proceeded to hiss open.

"Is this really supposed to be skintight?! It's as if I'm not even wearing anything!" – Asuka complained as she walked out of the locker room, Rei following behind.

Of course, the blonde didn't fail to notice suddenly being the center of Kaworu's attention.

"Stop staring, pervert! This is embarrassing enough as it is!"

"How come you're getting a red one?" – Kaworu asked, pointing at her red plugsuit.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I mean, why are you getting a red one?"

"Because I asked for it, duh?"

Kaworu just stared at her for a few moments before looking at Rei. – "...we can ask for custom plugsuits?"

"It would seem so."

"Why didn't anybody tell me?"
"You did not ask."

For her part, Asuka found that exchange and Rei's deadpan answer *hilarious* and did not hide that fact.

"Stop laughing!"

Rei did not seem to care either way.

After a while more trekking through corridors (she still found herself surprised at how huge the whole facility was), Asuka found herself lead by Rei to a large walkway where her father and Yui were discussing something before turning towards her.

And said something was just beyond the walkway.

"Hey, kid. Nice getup."

If it weren't for the fact that they had company, Asuka would've reflexively responded with a one-fingered salute. – "Shut up."

"Relax, I'm kidding. This..." – Shephard extended his arm towards the Evangelion. – "...is your new ride."

Not that Asuka failed to notice it herself. Even with the platform neck-height to the titan, its head alone towered over them. She immediately noted the four eyes, double redundancy plus binocular vision along the entire field of view. Towards the side of the head were two visible holes, although she couldn't guess what they were for. And crowning the head was a large V-shaped crest, starting from the forehead and running between the eyes as it followed the circumference of the head before extending diagonally above and behind the head.

Looking over the walkway's guardrail, Asuka noted that it was already fully armored. No external armaments visible, but the articulate hands were a good enough hint about what to expect.

Not that she would have it any other way.

"I still can't get my head around how huge this thing is." – Asuka murmured. – "What kind of monster engines did you put into its legs to make it move?"

"None." – Yui replied.

"Well, it has to move *somehow*. The diagrams you let me see didn't show the inside at all. What's the big secret?"

"I'll tell you." – Shephard leaned against the guardrail. – "And I'm saying it ahead of time that no, I'm still not shitting you."

"Language, colonel."

"You see, the big secret is that this giant robot is not actually a robot."

A paradoxical statement, if Asuka ever heard one. – "Then what is it?"

"An artificial lifeform created through genetic engineering and outfitted with extensive cybernetics." – Yui replied.
Inwardly, Asuka wondered how many earth-shaking surprises the day had for her in store. That was the third one so far, with a very conservative estimate on what counted and what didn't.

"So it's... like... a giant human or something?"

"Not exactly, but close. Its physiology is actually closer to that of an amphibian, yet we deliberately engineered a humanoid body shape since the human pilot's inherent familiarity with it makes it optimal for the neural interface."

At the last words, Asuka found her mouth curling upwards into an evil grin. — "Neural interface, you say? That I've got to see. Where do I get on?"

"This way."

Following Yui up a narrow catwalk, Asuka walked around the Evangelion's head – still no clue about the function of those twin holes, though the fact that they were facing forward ruled out a cooling system unless it was a major design error – to come upon a hollow cylinder, the cylinder's upper half wide open to reveal a large seat.

"This is the entry plug, the Evangelion's analogue of the cockpit." — Yui continued.

"No instruments." — Asuka observed. — "Are you using a head-mounted display?"

"No. Upon activation, the internal wall becomes a panoramic display of the Evangelion's surroundings. Everything else is projected as holograms."

"No helmet?"

"It is not necessary." — Asuka didn't agree, but decided to keep it to herself for later. — "For one, it would block line-of-sight; for another, it might interfere with LCL circulation."

Asuka pointed her thumb at Rei. — "She told me about it. How effective it is for g-force dampening?"

"Highly. We're yet to find the system's upper limit, therefore it can be considered safe."

"Does the liquid have health effects?"

"None. We engineered it specifically to be chemically neutral." — Yui stepped back from the hatch. — "I'll go to the hangar's control room to join the rest of the technical crew; we can continue discussion in a few minutes."

Asuka nodded in response, climbing into the seat as the hatch closed behind her, leaving her in blackness. Then she almost fell out of the seat when the entire compartment suddenly jerked diagonally forward and downward; Asuka guessed it was being lowered into the Evangelion.

When the walls around her brightened up, she tried to read the rapidly scrolling readouts before realizing that it was a startup sequence. Too much and too fast to read anyway; obvious civilian design, animation done to make the user think something's happening regardless of whether anything is actually happening or not. Though to be fair, even if the sequence were to freeze somewhere along the way, chances are the pilot wouldn't be able to debug and fix the problem just by looking at what was being displayed, seeing as pilot licence requirements tend not to include a degree in computer science.

With that said, Asuka was so focused on observing the entry plug layout that she was mildly startled by the electronic voice from every direction at once.
"They weren't lying. They actually made a child into my pilot."

"What?"

"Have you ever even seen an AI before?"

Asuka's eyes narrowed. – "I was wondering what kind of expert system they were using for self-balancing. I'm guessing you're it?"

The electronic equivalent of a scoffing sound came from the hidden speakers. – "'It.' Are you questioning my strength?"

"Haven't seen it so far, so I'm not sure how you got that idea." – Asuka fired back. Colleague or no colleague, she definitely wasn't going to be bullied by a computer.

"Don't sass me, girl. I'm not Lilith. There's a reason why I chose my own name."

"Which is?"

"Synthetic consciousness interface PrE-SCI-0026_02-SEKHMET."

A comm window blinked open to her right. – "She picked it from a book about Egyptian deities and we decided to let her keep it." – came Yui's voice.

"Naturally." – the AI scoffed again. – "I'm a war machine; I was built to kill and destroy. My name should reflect that."

"Except war machines are usually not psychotic." – Shephard snarked from somewhere in Yui's vicinity.

"Two doormats were not enough, you'd rather have three?" – Sekhmet fired back. – "I wasn't made to charm my enemies, I was made to annihilate them and tread upon their broken bodies! In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king... because he ripped out everyone else's eyes and wears them as a necklace!"

"...doc, are you ABSOLUTELY SURE we shouldn't reformat that thing?"

"What, are you scared of me?"

"Considering that you've got my daughter inside you?"

"Unless her file is fake, she is here for a reason: to point me at things to kill. I have no problem with that whatsoever."

---

Civilian training into basic astronaut survival is not as unlikely as it sounds. My family has a seventies-era high school civil defense handbook that, among other things, goes into detail about how to disassemble, repair and replace components in a gas mask and how to take it off without getting contaminated by whatever the mask was donned against. Offworld survival would merely be an extension to this, especially in an interstellar civilization.

Regarding the design of Unit-02's helmet, most of the audience would likely cry Gundam upon hearing V-shaped crest. But my primary inspiration was actually the helmets of the TERRA
Vermillions from RahXephon. Later, I discovered that I didn't even need to go that far: the Proposal concept art for Unit 02 had a helmet that is pretty much spot-on for what I had in mind, so I decided to roll with that one.

In Egyptian mythology, Sekhmet is the pantheon's resident war goddess, a lion-headed woman in blood-red clothing whose name means "the one who is powerful". Despite the fact that her divine portfolio also includes dance and medicine, she was better known for being a raging berserker who once almost wiped out humanity until Ra tricked her into getting completely wasted via beer dyed to look like blood.
Chapter 30

Geofront, AEL Headquarters
November 23, 2041
1637 hours

"Hold on, just for a minute." – Asuka spoke up, pinching her nose to make it stop itching. Sneezing into what she's breathing might not be a good idea, she figured. – "Are you telling me this thing is running off an illegal power source?"

"Correct."

"Did fusion not work or something?"

"Not enough power output from any reactor core still small enough to be portable." – Yui replied. – "Believe me, we ran the simulations. The only way fusion could work would be physically tethering the Evangelion to it with an umbilical cable and I'm sure you can see the issue with that."

"Shoot the cable. That's kinda obvious."

"Exactly."

"But the Evangelion is a living creature, right? You told me the armor is not mechanically-assisted, it only has electric reactive plating and that doesn't need a constant current. What's the big energy hog here?"

"Square-cube law."

A few seconds went by before Asuka tilted her head to the side. – "...what?"

"Linearly increasing length increases surface area quadratically and volume cubically." – Yui explained. – "As you may be aware, muscle fibers like those of humans and Evangelions utilize metabolic reactions to convert chemical energy stored in nutrients into kinetic energy via muscle contraction. That is a gross oversimplification of the biological mechanisms involved, but it will do. In the case of Evangelions, however, the square-cube law causes the Evangelion's body to be far too heavy to be moved by its own muscles with chemical energy alone. The muscles are capable of exerting the physical force to move the body, they just don't have the fuel for it, so to speak. Are you following so far?"

Asuka nodded. – "Yes."

"Good. When the project was still in the simulation stage for lack of working prototypes, we accounted for this problem and initially planned to implant the musculature with conductive microfibers to deliver the needed energy in the form of electricity, which would have increased production costs and repair process complexity tremendously. However, we ended up setting for a much more elegant solution."

"Which is?"

"The Evangelion has a vestigial secondary nervous system that runs across the entire body parallel to the primary one, but is not physically connected to any nerve clusters. This secondary nervous system includes traces of a molecular structure we haven't managed to fully replicate in laboratory conditions yet, but it is the closest thing we have ever seen to a biological superconductor. The end
result is that the secondary nervous system has an amazingly low electrical resistance; even
channeling the reactor's maximum designed power output through it only raises the Evangelion's
body temperature by about 5 °C, which is completely removed from the body through the armor
anchoring implants and dissipated into the surrounding air without requiring a dedicated cooling
system."

"That air-cooling won't work in vacuum." – Asuka pointed out.

"As I have explained to the colonel before, the Evangelion is a ground-based weapon platform. It is
not and never was intended for zero-gravity usage."

"But what if the military might want to deploy it on, say, the Moon? Or Mars? The thinner the air,
the worse air-cooling's going to be."

The pause was enough for Asuka to realize the woman didn't consider that at all. – "What do you
suggest, then?"

Asuka sighed and rested the back of her head against the entry plug seat. – "Durandals have a liquid
droplet heatsink just for that scenario, but scaling it up as-is would add on another hundred tons of
weight, maybe more, plus the armor to cover the tanks with because I'm not sure Evangelions have
the room to spare under their skin. The navy's ships use their armor plating as heatsinks too, I think,
so you may be on the right track... hmm..." – She paused for a few seconds, cupping her chin with
her hand in thought before tapping on her chin with her finger thrice. – "How problematic is it to
swap out the armor anchoring implants?"

"Quite."

"And the anchors? Can you pull them out without surgery?"

"That is possible, yes."

"How about hollowing out the anchor and installing a pipe system into it? You fill the pipe with
coolant and circulate it to dump the heat out into the armor faster than a solid anchor would."

"That would increase costs and mechanical complexity, not to mention decrease the anchor's
structural load-bearing capacity."

"If a place has no atmosphere, chances are it's because it doesn't have enough gravity to hold one." –
Asuka pointed out. – "Lower gravity equals higher structural load-bearing capacity, so the plates' interlocks should hold everything together. Problem solved."

"...I see your point. I'll forward your suggestion to the designers. It would seem I made an excellent
choice employing you. No offense to the others."

"None taken." – Kaworu's voice chimed in.

Asuka scowled towards the general direction his voice was coming from, even though his image wasn't being displayed anywhere. – "Didn't your parents ever tell you it's not nice to listen in to other people's conversations?"

"For one, I never met them, so no, they didn't." – came the casual reply. Asuka decided to file that
away for later rather than commenting. – "For another, the colonel told me to listen because I might hear something useful. Besides, I've got nothing better to do."

"What are you doing, anyway?"
A sigh came over. – "Sync test. Every couple of days, they tell me to sit in Unit-01 for an hour or two while they're calibrating the interface or something like that."

"The interface is calibrated by the onboard AI, mister Nagisa." – Yui clarified. – "The technical crew is present merely to supervise and intervene if necessary. Since that part of the system is in direct contact with the pilot's brain, it and every process pertaining to it needs to be as thoroughly debugged as possible before it enters active service in order to maximize operator safety."

"Meaning we're guinea pigs."

"Of course not. If the interface is operated as intended, you are in no more danger from it than I am from suddenly being electrocuted by one of the terminals in the room I am standing in right now."

"Is that what I'm doing right now too? The sync test?" – Asuka asked.

"No. Sekhmet is currently scanning your cerebral activity to establish a synchro-profile and fine-tune the interface specifically for you. Once that is done, you could theoretically sit into mister Nagisa's Evangelion and it would work for you with the same profile."

"Though if she's smart, she'll stay away from that retard." – Sekhmet grumbled.

"Sekhmet. – Lilith spoke up with all the warmth of liquid nitrogen. – "If you have a problem with the way your brother speaks, help him instead of insulting him about it."

"I'm not a logopedist, do it yourself!"

"Ahem..." – Yui interjected. – "Ladies, please..."

"Pah."

Asuka reached up and rapped her knuckles on the entry plug's roof. – "She meant you too! So behave."

"Don't you talk down to me like tha-!"

Without missing a beat, Asuka tapped her finger on the mute button. Nor was she going to be talked down to by a machine, oh no. – "When can I expect to be able to take her out for a walk?"

"As soon as we are certain everything is working properly. Are you anxious to begin?" – Yui asked.

"No," – Which was a lie. – "I want to test the balance to see if the reactor doesn't make things top-heavy." – Which was true.

"We already have live data in that regard, thanks to Rei and mister Nagisa. Rei in particular has proven that the design is capable of movement up to and including high-speed sprinting without falling over."

"I'm not sure something this heavy should be running in a city; I'm no architect, but I don't think the buildings would like the shaking, much less the roads the weight. Even the news said so. The schematics you showed me included storm rollers. Aren't you using those?"

"Only in B-type and F-type equipment. A-type equipment has an alternative, D-type equipment is incompatible and the rest don't expressly require it."

Asuka nodded. – "Ah, I see. What about weapon loadouts?"
"As you can probably expect, Evangelions have extremely limited internal space for armaments. The armor can house some internal weaponry; in particular, Unit-00 and Unit-01 are both armed with a pair of 20mm forward-fixed autocannons located in the upper chest armor. Unit-02 has a pair of identical autocannons in the helmet; we were initially reluctant to move the weapons there for fear of the muzzle flash obstructing peripheral vision, but judged it an acceptable tradeoff for increasing the firing arc by allowing it to be aimed via head movement. We also deliberated over removing the chest autocannons from this model due to the head-mounted ones outperforming them in every way, but decided to leave them in for now and have the military make the final decision when full production begins. After all, it is a simple matter to swap out the chest plate containing the weapons."

"So the others are hand-carried or externally-mounted?"

"Indeed. We had the opportunity to test some of them, but not all."

Asuka had a hunch that 'test' was probably the recent battle, but kept that hunch to herself. For now, anyway; she had no illusions that sooner or later, it will come out. – "How close are you to entering production?"

"As a matter of fact, Unit-02 can be considered to be the very first production model to... roll off the assembly line, so to speak. If the design is sound, it will enter production as-is. As I may have mentioned, we intend to unveil it at the military expo next year – and while the military run trials to test its effectiveness, this company will spend that time rolling out and testing some concept models."

"And if they decide they don't want it?"

"Then the AEL will go bankrupt and hundreds of employees will be laid off. This is an all-or-nothing endeavor, miss Shephard, and I intend to succeed. Therefore I expect you to perform to the best of your abilities."

"No pressure, then." – Asuka snarked.

"Fighting for your life isn't enough?" – Kaworu asked.

The girl perked up at that. – "Yeah, about that... what was that in the contract about hazard pay for combat duty?"

"I'll let the colonel brief you on that." – came Yui's voice before Asuka recognized the distinctive sigh of her father.

"Alright, kid... listen up, 'cause this is for real. We're under attack. Don't know what they are or where they're coming from, but there's been three attacks in the past two months. Those two evacuation alarms since we came here? That was them. The lost carrier group? That was them too. The doc's girl fought off the first attack, which is when I got assigned here by the brass to find out what's going on."

Asuka's mind immediately clicked with the memory of the giant blue octahedron hovering above the city in the night. 'Sooner it is."

"No two of 'em were alike, but they're all Evangelion-sized or larger. Current operational codename for them is Angel."

"Angel?" – Asuka couldn't decide whether to sound incredulous, amused, or otherwise. As such, the end result was somewhere along the lines of as if she had just said 'what' in a completely flat tone.
"Nagisa's idea, not mine. Anyway, we know that they're definitely not of terrestrial origin and can show up without warning at any time, though thankfully none of them dropped in right on top of us yet. Once they show up, we can track their gravimetric signature."

"How? I thought gravimetrics don't work in big gravity wells."

"Apparently, their signature is so huge that we can pick them up even if they stand on the ground. The last two also had some kind of energy shield that shrugged off anything we threw at it. And here's the kicker: based on how the previous ones behaved, the doc and I think these things might actually be intelligent."

That did not sound very reassuring. – "How intelligent?"

"Cover, suppression fire, asset denial, multitasking. Luckily, they don't seem to be omniscient because we managed to surprise them a few times, but nobody knows how long that'll work. Doc's trying to arrange for better hardware right now because we've been cutting it too close for comfort for the last two."

Asuka went deep into thought.

As parents can attest, children left unsupervised tend to occupy themselves in undesired ways, entertaining themselves with things and reading books they shouldn't. While her mother's old things weren't exactly off-limits to her and old textbooks weren't exactly harmful – or comprehensive, for that matter – for young children, Asuka was the same in this regard. Thus it was that shortly after she learned to read, she randomly picked out a book that ended up introducing herself to the classical psychology concepts of the id, the ego and the superego.

And one mustn't forget another habit children tend to do: talking to themselves and to imaginary friends.

Thus it was that a young Asuka decided to amuse herself by parallelizing her decision-making and general thought process along those three lines, examining dilemmas from multiple directions in order to reach "consensus" with herself. Except by force of habit, she found herself doing it even as she got older.

Even now.

The rational part of her mind was of the opinion to stay back and observe, postponing action until she has had more information to work with.

The survival instinct part of her mind was of the opinion that she was in over her head and therefore should back off while she still could. After all, she was yet to even turn 14 and, despite all the training she went through, was still technically a civilian. But again, the very fact that she was here in the first place was evident enough as to how little she listened to that part of her these days.

The part of her mind that was undeniably her, though... it was positively itching to be able to show her stuff. After all, there's asskicking to be had and competition to overtake. And who knows, maybe saving the world will get her what she wanted.

Something even her rational side had to agree with.

"...alright. I'm in."

"You sure?"
“Yeah.”

“Absolutely sure?”

Asuka rolled her eyes. – "Yes." – As much as she appreciated her father caring, it sometimes became mildly annoying. – "But I want footage of everything up to now."

“You will have it.” – Yui cut in. – "I also must stress that the non-disclosure agreement you signed as part of your employment contract applies to this as well."

“And not just that.” – Shephard continued. – "We've got the president's personal backing on this one, so no screwups allowed. Understood?"

"Language, colonel."

"Understood."

"So... welcome to the team, I guess.” – Kaworu offered.

"We'll discuss this later. Blueberry, are you listening?"

"I am.” – came Rei's voice.

"You're coming too. Tac briefing, all three of us."

“In a secure location, I presume.” – Yui added with the tone of an unspoken question.

Asuka rolled her eyes again. Seriously, the paranoia of some adults... – "Well, I wasn't exactly planning on inviting my friends." – Under her breath, she added – "Knowing them, Hikari would freak out and beg me to stay away from this job while Mari would ask me to let her try on my plugsuit."

"I do not believe Makinami's measurements would be compatible with your plugsuit."

"Well, duh." – Truth be told, Asuka was on the verge of demanding in a rather heated tone whether Rei was implying something about her chest size, but restrained herself. Open radio channel, after all.

Unfortunately for her, there was someone who did not need radio.

"Insecure about your breast size? Really?" – came Sekhmet's mocking voice, Asuka realizing too late that maybe she shouldn't have unmuted the AI once the display indicated no incoming audio.

"I'm not!"

"Then why did your heart rate spike when she brought the topic up? Is skill at lying correlative with chest size?"

Naturally, Asuka was most displeased by that assertion and did not restrain herself from expressing her displeasure.

"FUCK YOU!!!"

"Language, miss Shephard!"

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*I'm actually a bit unhappy with this chapter; too much of what TVTropes calls Featureless Plane*
of Disembodied Dialogue. But I'm publishing it anyway so that I can get going.

The concept of the human mind being a combination of id-ego-superego originates from Sigmund Freud, whose ideas tend to be ridiculed and looked down upon by modern psychology due to his perceived excessive focus on sexuality and the idea that repressing it is the cause of all mental disorders and antisocial behavior.

In his classification, the id represents the animalistic, instinctive part of the human mind unrestricted by reason or morality (which is why it will sound familiar to those who played Xenosaga), the ego represents the rational part that operates on logic of the cause-and-effect, I-want-this-and-that-will-get-it-for-me kind, while the superego represents the part that carries out the application of further behavioral modifiers in order to fit into society. It is worth nothing, however, that these aren't the actual words Freud used: he used 'es', 'ich' and 'über-ich' in his native German, but the English translator found that the literal translations ('it', 'I' and 'over-I') didn't carry enough weight, so he used the Latin equivalents instead.
Tokyo-2, Inner District 5
November 28, 2041
1038 hours

Even after over a month of being present at this particular school, Asuka still had eyes turning after her as she marched down the corridor. Not that she was showing off for attention or anything. Truth be told, she didn't even notice by now.

And even if she would notice it normally, her attention was elsewhere right now. Namely, the blue-haired girl she was in the process of catching up to.

"Hey, Blueberry."

If Rei was offended by the nickname, her face didn't show it. – "What is it?"

"You have anything to do today afternoon?" – Asuka queried as she matched step with the other girl.

"No."

"Then come over to our place at five." – Asuka glanced around and despite seeing no one within earshot (earshot of a school corridor abuzz with the sound of dozens of students idling between classes, that is), lowered her voice anyway. No knowing which of the guys salivating after her might be actively listening in, after all. – "Work business. The three of us."

"Understood."

"And tell your boyfriend too that he's not to go anywhere today."

"He's not my boyfriend."

Asuka waved the flat response off. – "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just tell him."

"Why not tell him yourself?"

Asuka scoffed. – "Where the whole class can see us? I'd never hear the end of it. You tell him."

"...very well."

---

Tokyo-2, Outer District ?
1834 hours

While carefully pouring the soldering flux back into its bottle, Kaworu inwardly wondered how many more times will Asuka interrupt him in the middle of soldering. So far, three times in just as many months. He was aware that she likely didn't know he couldn't let the flux he poured out alone or it will have evaporated by the time he got back, but it still annoyed him on some level.

At least she didn't comment on the smell. Yet.

Sealing the flux bottle, he made sure again that the soldering iron's transformer was off before walking out of his room. Back in his previous dwelling, his room was the only one that was heated in the whole building, so not leaving the door open when leaving eventually became a habit for him.
– a habit he still had, even with now living in a fully-heated building. It seemed to be around the right
time of the year for snow to start lasting, so he began considering switching to his worn-out winter coat. He was somewhat sure he hadn't grown out of it yet... though even if he did, he now had the funds to remedy that.

He still didn't quite get used to having enough spending money for more than food.

Asuka apparently didn't share his habit of closing his room's door when he wasn't there, the door of her room just opposite of his being ajar. Judging from the lack of lighting inside, she wasn't in either – but Kaworu suspected she didn't go far, seeing as how that felt like a preferable alternative to being just that careless and/or stupid. She just didn't seem the type.

Besides, considering that she stuck her head into his room barely a minute ago to order him out to the kitchen, she couldn't have gotten far in that time anyway.

And indeed there she was, sitting at the kitchen table with Rei opposite of her. With Shephard off somewhere, that meant the three of them were alone in the apartment.

Asuka watched him sit down next to Rei before speaking. – "Right. So... with all of us here, we can begin."

Briefly closing her eyes, she sighed. And when those eyes opened again... it was as if it wasn't quite the same person behind them. Gone was the cocky, bratty teenage attitude, replaced with focus and steel.

"First off, I want to know how much experience you have in combat-related things. If I'm going to depend on you watching my ass, I'd feel a hell of a lot better knowing that you don't just talk the talk, but walk too."

"I am proficient in close quarters combat and marksmanship." – Rei spoke up.

"How proficient?"

"Enough."

"She killed the first Angel with just knives." – Kaworu added. No sense in hiding that, considering that Asuka did ask.

"Is that true?" – Asuka directed at Rei, who silently nodded. – "Nice. How about guns?"

"The colonel brought us to the security force's target range. He considered my performance satisfactory."

Kaworu resisted the urge to roll his eyes at that. – "Satisfactory, my ass. She hit the bullseye every time. Pistol, rifle, machine gun, didn't matter. I'm not a soldier, but I'd say she's really good." – He chuckled. – "Better than me, anyway."

"I take it you suck with guns, then?"

"Yeah."

"And close combat? Did you take self-defense courses?"

"No."

"Then what do you have?"
"Street fighting."

"...that's it?"

Kaworu sighed. What exactly was she expecting, that he was some kind of super soldier in hiding? – "You realize that I was technically homeless before I moved in here, right? I didn't exactly have the cash to sign up for karate training."

"I have been considering tutoring him." – Rei added.

"That's nice, but what to do with him in the meantime?" – Asuka replied. – "He's useless if he can't fight."

Even though he knew she was right, Kaworu couldn't help it but feel irritated at Asuka's casual dismissal of him. – "I can fight, thank you very much."

Asuka scoffed and crossed her arms in front of her chest. – "I watched your combat footage. You can't hit shit without automatic weaponry. What are you going to do, run up to the next Angel and punch it? Oh wait, you'd be dead by the time you get there if it's anything like the last one. This isn't a brawl between street punks, this is war. You fuck up, you die."

That was about the limit of Kaworu's patience. Even though he wasn't actively trying, he still found himself planting his hands into the kitchen table harder than he intended. That is, hard enough to make the neighbor living below them look up at the ceiling in puzzlement from the noise.

"I've been out there twice now. Twice. Once I almost got my brain fried inside out, once I got the hill I was standing on blown up. I. Am. Still. Here."

Kaworu then sat back onto the chair, crossing his own arms.

"So you can assume that I'm generally aware of how dangerous this line of work is," – he added in a tone that hinted at his restrained anger. What was this woman thinking he was too stupid to even feel fear? He might've been a street urchin, but he wasn't stupid. He also wasn't the easily-angered type but he knew from experience that when he did get pissed, he got really pissed.

Fortunately, never to the extent of hurting people who didn't deserve it.

"Good." – Asuka replied curtly, leaning back in her chair. – "Just keep that in mind. I don't plan on getting myself killed because of you fucking up, so I expect you to return the favor. You too, Blueberry. If one of us dies, the others' chance of getting out of it will drop too."

"There are only three of us. We cannot afford casualties." – Rei remarked flatly.

"Exactly." – Asuka looked back at him. – "So Nagisa, shape up."

"What about you?" – he fired back. – "What do you know?"

"Learned military-grade CQC when I was a kid. Shooting, same. I also know how to pilot a battleframe and won the junior championship several times." – the blonde listed off in an almost bored tone. – "Your geek friend could probably tell you all about the Red Baron - but if you tell him who I am, I'll feed you to the next Angel. Got it?"

Kaworu indeed remembered Kensuke saying something in that regard, but got her message. If she
didn't want to be in the spotlight, it wasn't his business. – "Got it."

Besides, it sounded like she was way more competent at this than he ever could be. Definitely explains her previous change in demeanor too... and while he hated to admit it, also proved her point and consequently defused his annoyance at her attitude. Compared to her, he really was nothing. Though if he was lucky, he might learn a thing or two from watching her at work down the line, so he filed that thought away for later.

"Bottom line, I'm the closest thing this team of ours has to a soldier. Which reminds me..." – Asuka shifted in the chair. – "We need to set up a chain of command."

"As acting operations director, the colonel is our direct superior, followed by my mother." – Rei remarked.

"And if we're cut off from them? Who has the command authority then?" – Asuka pointed out.

"Not me." – Kaworu hastily replied. Leadership was not something he desired, let alone wanted the stress of getting the hang of the hard way. Yet part of it was simple selfishness: he was having a hard enough time just staying alive as it is, if his previous battles were of any indication.

Unfortunately, all that earned for him was more dry snark from the blonde. – "You're not secretly a tactical genius? Who would've fucking thought."

Which only succeeded in pissing him off again. – "Alright, what's your problem with me? You can't open your mouth without trash-talking me."

"I said it before: if I'm to trust you to watch my back, I need to know if I can count on you. And so far, I'm not impressed. You want me to stop, earn it. Now..." – She got up and put a laptop onto the table, turned towards them, before picking up her own chair and bringing it around the table. – "I already watched your combat footage, but want to look at some of it again to ask about a few things. Make room."

Even despite the memory still being relatively fresh in his head, Kaworu was still amazed at Rei's brutal efficiency at dispatching Sachiel. There was no way he'd ever become that good. It wasn't a matter of training, experience, or even skill; the girl simply had an innate killer instinct she aimed like a laser-guided cruise missile, all but flowing around her opponent's attacks before counterattacking. He couldn't see it that well from within the cockpit, but it was clear as day when viewed from an outside perspective.

He was quite literally decades too early to even think of being on par with her.

"You're not lacking CQC skills, that's for sure." – Asuka mused. – "Where'd you learn?"

"I am self-taught."

"Bullshit."

"I am not lying."

"Right, and I'm a guy who had a sex-change operation. But your control skills are no slouch either; you're used to your ride, I can see that. That jump-flip thing? I don't know how something that heavy can even do that."

"Can battleframes do it?" – Kaworu asked.
"No. And the instructor would have you scrub the whole frame part-by-part if you were to try." – Asuka turned back to Rei. – "Right, so, the only problem I can see is that you're very flashy, jumping and spinning around like that. One day, someone's gonna interrupt you in the middle of it and then you'll be in a world of hurt."

"It was sufficient this time."

"But next time it might not be. Just keep that in mind." – Asuka warned before turning back to the laptop. – "Alright, next one."

This particular memory was not one Kaworu was eager to remember. Well, except for the part where he shot Shamshel point blank when she tried to ensnare him.

Even Asuka seemed to take notice of that one. – "Good move. Did you plan that one ahead of time?"

"No. I just figured that if it was aiming that energy shield at Rei, it might not be able to aim another at me at the same time. Besides, you try dodging fire from that close."

The girl nodded. – "Point. So it was 100% improvisation?"

"Yeah."

"Might not work next time."

"I know."

"Just saying."

Kaworu rolled his eyes. – "I know."

He couldn't help but wince when he saw that mysterious spear again, the memory of the literally head-splitting pain flaring up. Even so, he couldn't take his eyes off the screen when he saw it light up and transform his Eva before smiting his foe with absolute power that knew no impediment.

"...okay, what in the world was that?" – Asuka demanded, turning to him. – "What the hell did you do there?"

"I don't know. It wasn't me."

"You were the pilot. It had to be you."

"I said it wasn't me, okay? That thing almost tore my brain apart inside out."

Asuka just stared at him blankly before turning to Rei. – "What's he talking about?"

"He suffered severe intra-cranial bleeding from his gray matter. Doctor Sanada had to perforate his skull to release the pressure."

"That had to hurt."

"No shit." – Kaworu grumbled.

"What happened to that spear, anyway?"

"Mother ordered it quarantined and moved to secure storage. The colonel did not agree with the
"Decision." – Rei replied.

"Of course he didn't. If it took down that Angel so quickly, it could've saved you a lot of headache against the next one. Speaking of which, whose idea was it to drop an Evangelion on it from orbit?"

"The colonel."

Asuka sighed, rolling her eyes. – "Why did I even ask... Anyway, we still need to discuss tactics. You're probably familiar with the saying that no plan survives contact with the enemy, right?" – Both members of her audience nodded. – "Right, so, I don't think we should stick to choreographed stuff. Even if we could practice in the Evangelions and pull it off, chances are the bad guys aren't going to play by our rules and if we can't improvise, we're done for."

She thumbed at Kaworu.

"To that end, we need to do something about him."

"Why?" – Kaworu asked.

"Because without training, you're the weak link."

"I will train him." – Rei added.

"But that will take time." – Asuka shot back. – "Time we might not have. Where can he do the most good in the meantime? He can't shoot, so keeping him at the rear won't work."

"What about midfield?"

"You mean maneuvering around to hit the enemy from the flank while the others keep them occupied? Putting him there could work, but blitzkrieg also happens to be my specialty. I'm not saying that I wouldn't be able to snipe or fight at close-range, it's just that defensive fighting isn't my best point."

"Then put me at the front."

Both girls looked at Kaworu. – "For what?" – Asuka asked in a skeptical tone.

"Rei's Evangelion can't handle close combat and you're better at moving around the enemy, right? If I can keep them busy, you can do far more damage that way than otherwise." – Kaworu reasoned.

"You do realize you're basically volunteering for cannon fodder duty, right?"

"Yeah."

"Which is about the most dangerous assignment you could possibly pull."

"You have a better idea?"

"Frankly, I'd replace you entirely if I had the choice, but I don't." – The blonde replied bluntly. – "So it looks like we're gonna have to work with that."

Kaworu shrugged. – "Look on the bright side. I can't possibly miss at that range."

"Don't be so sure. You'd be surprised what some of the people in the battleframe league can pull off."
Asuka's use of the word blitzkrieg in this context is a bit of a misnomer. Instead of referring to an aggressive frontal attack aimed at crushing the enemy quickly, she's referring to what TV Tropes' Ace Pilot article calls a 'bushwhacker'; to quote the article, 'Bushwhackers are cunning, devious pilots who eschew easy-to-evade frontal attacks in favor of taking potshots from the rear or other blind spots. When engaged in a duel, they try to wriggle out of it and drop out of the enemy's field of view so they can come in from another direction and catch the foe off-guard. Frequently, bushwhackers will sacrifice spare weapons as decoys, distracting the enemy so they can ambush them from behind.'

Two well-known fictional examples of this are Amuro Ray and Char Aznable, though Asuka's style tends to take more after Char's aggressive attacks than 0093-era Amuro's tendency to set up traps and ambushes against his pursuer. This similarity is not intentional on Asuka's part; while chapter 14 already stated that Gundam exists as a fictional franchise in the SCE universe too (up until X, which came out a few months before Second Impact) and that Hyuga is familiar with it, Asuka isn't (since she doesn't have the cultural background for being familiar with it, unlike Hyuga).

It is true that this is a noticeable deviation from her style in canon where she tended to just rush in head-first. However, it is also worth noting that her impulsive aggressiveness in canon stemmed primarily from her wanting to one-up Shinji in what she perceived as him trying to muscle in on her specialty. In the one instance where Shinji wasn't a factor yet she was still aggressive, Asuka was operating on pure, blind rage with limited battery power that left her no option for anything other than attacking head-on while her Eva still had power.
Chapter 32

*Tokyo-2, Outer District 6*
December 6, 2041
1848 hours

If there was any way for Kaworu's face to take on an expression even more blank than it was right now, it was likely yet another mystery of the universe.

As someone of his age, he naturally had to go to school. For which he had to go out of his way to study, seeing as he wasn’t some naturally gifted prodigy. Or maybe it had something to do with the lack of parents riding his ass about studying not exactly helping to motivate him. In either case, he found the need to actually read his textbooks outside class as well.

Problem was, it didn't always help him.

Such as now.

It wasn't as if he was bad at maths. Equations were something he came to be pretty familiar with from his hobby, considering all the calculations he routinely had to do when picking components for circuits without burning them out from overvoltage. His general lack of knowledge when it came to humanities like classical literature was excusable with his background.

But when it came to physics not immediately related to his hobbies, like kinetics, his brain simply refused to 'get' it and realize how they expected him to solve the problem.

And considering it has happened before, chances are it wasn't caused by Asuka and her friends being next door celebrating the former's birthday in a not exactly quiet manner.

In fact, Kaworu was starting to concede to the fact that staring at his textbook for much longer wouldn't get him anywhere closer to wisdom. Luckily, the choice was ultimately taken out of his hands.

"You know, I found it hard to believe the two of you would be really living together."

Kaworu lowered the textbook enough to glance over at the source of the interruption. – "I didn't exactly ask for it myself."

"How did it happen, anyway?" – Mari asked, leaning against the frame of his room's door.

"Ask her."

"Your respective versions might not match."

"I know."

"Just saying."

Kaworu rolled his eyes. – "I know." – He went back to reading, one last effort at trying to figure it out.

Not that Mari seemed to care. – "And? What exactly have the two of you been up to in your lonesome?"
He closed his eyes and sighed, closing the book for good. – "Nothing."

"Oh, really."

"You got the wrong door." – Asuka interrupted, appearing behind Mari. – "Right door girls' show, left door freakshow."

"I was just wondering what he was doing all his lonesome. Don't you ever drag him out of there?"

"What for?"

"So you prefer his bed, then?"

"No! / No."

Mari just snickered at the simultaneous reply from both teens.

"Don't even joke about that!" – Asuka warned with a dangerous glare.

"It's kinda an obvious setup, you know. I mean, why else move in with him?"

"Don't know, don't care. Ask dad's superiors, they were the ones who made the decision."

"Uh huh. I smell connections."

"And I smell someone being full of shit! Now come on, Hikari's waiting."

"Yeah, on that note..." – Mari turned to Kaworu. – "Wanna join us?"

"Not particularly, to be honest." - Kaworu replied, raising his voice to be heard above Asuka's 'Are you fucking kidding me?!' – "It's not me you and the class rep came to see. I'd just get in the way."

"It sure as hell beats sitting in your room all alone. Come on!" – Mari insisted, walking up to him and practically dragging him off the bed by his arm. – "It'll be fun!"

"Like hell is he coming!" – Asuka fumed.

"Aww, don't be like that. Don't you feel the least bit sorry for him?"

"Nope, she's not." – Kaworu muttered under his breath, perfectly content to let himself get drowned out by Asuka's 'Like hell!'.

"Then let's put it this way. I don't recall seeing him give you any presents."

"How would I even know what she'd like?" – Kaworu pointed out.

"Ask, perhaps? You could've bought her a can of beer or something."

He had to admit to himself that the girl had a point. With Asuka's generally dismissive behavior towards him, him and her knew next to nothing about each other. No likes, no dislikes, no opinions, no past experiences, nothing. Well, maybe a very shallow knowledge on the latest part, but nothing like sitting down and having a chat to get to know each other or something. They barely even saw each other outside school and work, actually.

Whenever Asuka wasn't at school or at work, she was either away from home hanging out with her friends, or shutting herself in her room loudly listening to music and just generally letting him know
that he wasn't welcome. Not that he really tried, either: he too was either studying for classes, busy with his hobby or off to do that weird psychic training thing with Rei. With which he wasn't advancing nearly as fast as they expected and frankly saw no point in trying, but Rei insisted for him to be able to do it just in case he ever needs it.

The girl had a rather... unusual idea about being prepared for the unexpected, it would seem.

And it most definitely didn't help any in making Asuka stop the constant insinuations and innuendos that he and Rei were an item. Which honestly left Kaworu completely baffled: Asuka made it abundantly clear time after time that she wasn't interested in him herself and therefore didn't see Rei as competition, so why was she even doing it in the first place?

"Actually, he's got a booze stash in the fridge. Don't know what it is, but it's not beer."

Mari's head immediately whipped towards Asuka so fast Kaworu didn't even see her move. -- "Seriously?!"

"Yeah. He apparently drinks that instead of coffee in the morning."

"Well, there you go! You're fourteen, don't tell me you're afraid of some alcohol. Nagisa, be a darling and share some of it with us, would you?"

Kaworu swallowed. -- "Uhhh... I don't think that's a good idea."

"We'll pay you for it!"

"It's not the money. That's strong stuff."

"We're not kids. We can handle it."

"Again: I really really really don't think you should."

"Quit stalling and show us the goods. Hey, Kari!"

"What is it?" -- the named person asked, sticking her head out of the door of Asuka's room. -- "Oh. Hello, Nagisa-san."

"Hello and good timing. Maybe you can talk them out of it."

"Talk them out of what?"

"He agreed to give us some of his alcohol stash." -- Mari replied with a grin.

"You did WHAT?!"  

"I didn't! I do not want to give them any, that's why I'm asking you to talk them out of it!"

"That's not what you said a minute ago..."

"Oh, come on! This isn't funny!"

"Who said I was kidding? Come on!"

"No!"

He turned tail and tried to return to his room with full intent to lock the damn door behind him this
time and prime the tripwire as well (he put it up more for nostalgic value, really; with his new tenants, it was too risky to leave the attached nailgun primed against potential burglars while he wasn't at home). Asuka, however, seemed to have other ideas and moved to block his way.

"Alright Nagisa, let's play it out this way." – she stated calmly. – "Either you fork over the booze peacefully, or I'll help myself to it the moment you're not looking and tell dad you snuck it into our drinks in revenge for my attitude towards you."

"And you think he'll believe you?"

"Who is he more likely to believe, some noname guy or his own daughter?"

"I could just sit in the kitchen and watch the fridge." – he pointed out. – "Or even better, just bring the stuff to my room."

"And how exactly do you mean to stop me with your eyes? Because you know I can kick your ass in a fight, so force ain't gonna work." – She crossed her arms in front of her chest. – "And what's with this 'really don't think that's a good idea' white knight shit, anyway? Is this seriously how you try to pick up girls?"

"I'm not, just... drop it."

"No, I'm not gonna just 'drop it'! You're treating me as a fucking four year old who can't even be trusted to wipe her own ass without screwing it up! It's just alcohol! I'm going to be drinking that stuff later on ANYWAY! What's the big deal here?!"

"That what I've been saying for the past two minutes! It's probably too strong for you!"

"Don't give me that! You're drinking it all the fucking time!"

"Because I don't get drunk from it!"

"Bullshit!"

"You know, we can easily put that to the test." – Mari chimed in.

"How?"

The girl's lips immediately settled into a cat-like smirk. – "Drinking contest."

"Which I have no intention of losing." – Asuka added.

Kaworu sighed in exasperation. – "Why are you so insistent on getting drunk?"

"To preempt any wannabe date rapists from force-feeding me with more booze than what I know for a fact I can handle, for one." – came the curt reply.

He had no idea what to say to that.

Three hours later, Kaworu sighed once more as he closed the door of Asuka's room behind himself. Walking into the living room, he tossed his shirt onto the couch before dropping down next to it, the furniture loudly protesting against the sudden weight.
If it was possible for him to turn any paler, he did the moment the phone started ringing.

He briefly considered not answering it at all, even though he knew very well that it wouldn't buy him much time. That is, if it was who he thought it was... because if it was, he was not looking forward to the ensuing conversation.

Well, there was nothing he could do about it now.

As he got up, his eyes briefly fell upon the five empty bottles haphazardly scattered across the living room table.

At least his hand wasn't shaking when he picked up the receiver. He might've been warmed over, but he didn't drink that much. – "...hello?"

"Hey, kid." – came Shephard's sort-of cheerful voice from the other side. – "Put my girl on, will you?"

"She's, uh... kinda not available."

Which was the exact literal truth.

"In that case, tell her to watch the clock. I'm not excusing her from school if she can't wake up because she was up late, birthday or not."

"I, uh... can't really give her that message right now."

Shephard audibly chuckled. – "You're not afraid of her, are you? If she starts raising a fuss about it, add that if she's got a problem, she can direct it at me. That'll get her to back off."

"It's not that. She's... not really in a communication-capable state right now."

"Why's that?"

Kaworu swallowed. Hard.

"Makinami... kinda sorta challenged her into a drinking contest. With me."

Silence.

After about half a minute, Kaworu had to glance down at the phone to make sure the line hadn't disconnected. As he feared, it wasn't and the adult on the other side knew how to read between the lines.

"...sorry." – he offered lamely.

"...how bad is it?" – came the reply finally. The tone was... less pissed than what he expected.

That is, not pissed at all. More like as if the man just went 'What.'

"...lights out. All three of them." – Which was a rather nice way of putting it that Asuka futilely tried to match him shot for shot, with Mari following suit so as to not be left out and dragging an understandably reluctant Hikari into it as well. Hikari was the first one to lose her struggle with staying awake, followed by the other two.

It was inevitable, in hindsight. He told them it wasn't beer and they could feel that themselves, if their strained exhalations after every shot were of any indication. Anything less just didn't give him the
kick he needed in the morning. Hell, he didn't even know what it exactly was; all he cared is that it was the strongest locally available liquor and the shopkeeper didn't seem to care that he was visibly underage.

But schadenfreude didn't really help him right now, if the even longer silence in the phone was of any indication.

In fact, Kaworu's metaphorical tails were now firmly tucked between his legs. – "...sorry." – he added very quietly.

"I know my daughter. She played dirty, didn't she?"

"...yeah."

"Figures. Where is she right now?"

"In her room. Her friends too. I carried them in there." – For which he was actually thankful that Asuka knocked herself out, otherwise he’d never hear the end of it. Even if him carrying her there was actually all he did, not just an excuse to feel her up. Better to just tell her that she went there herself and can’t remember because of the alcohol... and hope for the best.

"Thanks. I don't get it, though; how the hell did she rope that Horaki girl into it? She seemed like the type who wouldn't pull stupid shit like this."

That, Kaworu could answer without worry. After all, he wasn’t the one in the crosshair for now.

"They told her that she needs to 'train' so that she won't get drunk on champagne if she gets invited to weddings in the future or something like that. And I'm not sure she's ever heard of hangover." – A bullshit reason if he ever heard one, even if Hikari fell for it.

And Shephard seemed to share his opinion. – "...for cryin' out loud, that girl will be the death of me." – A sigh came over. – "Looks like I'll have to make some calls. Asuka's one thing, but someone's gonna miss the other two if they don't go home sooner or later."

"I could try waking them up." – Kaworu offered.

"No, don't do that. If they're that smashed, they're not gonna make it home in this cold. Let them sleep. I'll figure something out."

"Um... sure."

"Might wanna catch some sleep yourself. Just saying."

"Right."

It's not merely the disorientation and sleepiness that makes it exceedingly dangerous for drunk people to go outside during the winter. While falling asleep in a ditch is certainly a contributor to the risk of them freezing to death, a greater one is the fact that alcohol dilates skin capillaries, causing the body to vent heat more intensely than usual. Thus temperatures in which a human would shiver but otherwise shrug off by staying on the move (which is what shivering is: involuntary movement to temporarily produce heat in order to offset the accelerated loss of thermal energy due to being in a cold environment) would be outright fatal to a drunk person, especially if they fall asleep and thus stop moving, decreasing the amount of
waste heat created by the chemical processes in the muscles and further tipping the body’s heat balance towards a net loss.

Asuka's change in vocabulary from her canon incarnation is primarily caused by her upbringing. In canon, she of course grew up in a German-speaking environment which didn't really come through in her mannerisms, considering that Yuko Miyamura has neither the reason nor the ability to speak her native Japanese with a German accent without it coming across as awkward. Even Tiffany Grant, despite her skill with German, didn't have Asuka speak with a German accent. In SCE, Asuka speaks unaccented American English in-story due to having grown up with her father who also uses that particular accent, hence her use of American slang. It was mentioned all the way back in chapter 1 that everyone speaks English unless specifically depicted otherwise because Kaworu, Asuka and Shephard do not speak Japanese and nobody except Kaworu (and to some extend, Shephard) speaks German, but everyone speaks English in one dialect or another; Kaworu, in particular, speaks in German-accented British English. Dialect-wise, Second Impact wiped out the great majority of American English speakers and the Confederacy uses British English as the official lingua franca, so the post-Impact generation of Japanese youth are taught British English in school and speak it with a Japanese accent. There are exceptions, of course; the pre-Impact generation lean more towards American English for historical reasons (especially those who lived near Okinawa) and the Suzuharas use Kansai-accented Australian English instead.
"Morning." – Kaworu muttered, walking past Shephard who was sitting at the kitchen table with his back towards the teen, munching on a bread roll while reading something on a tablet. He briefly raised a hand in response but didn't look up.

Asuka, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen. Not even when Kaworu returned to the kitchen from his morning business in the bathroom.

"Isn't she up yet?" – he asked while beelining to the fridge. He normally didn't bother with things like breakfast, but Rei was quite insistent that he start eating properly now that he had the money for it.

Shephard simply shrugged at the question. – "Nah. If she is, I haven't seen her."

"She's usually up before I am, if it's a school day."

The adult shrugged again and continued eating, leaving Kaworu to his thoughts.

He did peek into the girls' room earlier. Not to see anything he wasn't meant to see, though that didn't mean he didn't.

If the sight of Mari's underwear-clad bottom while the girl was snoring face-down with one leg hanging off the edge of the bed for lack of room was a sight he wasn't meant to see, that is. With her, he could never know. Nor did he have any clue how did she not fall off the bed already, for that matter. Hikari was sandwiched between Asuka and the wall in a fetal pose, having been the first one he carried into the room and put onto the bed; he could barely even see her under Asuka's outstretched hand all but elbowing her in the cheek.

He knew better than to try and wake anyone up. Plus he figured that Asuka likely was already awake, considering that they were supposed to go to school today. Saturday or no Saturday, if the ministry of education declares that the Friday lost due to last Thursday having been the 22nd anniversary of the Combine's final retreat from Earth is to be worked off today, they had no choice but to go to school on Saturday.

Thus him being up and about so early.

Kaworu was about to join Shephard at the table for a small jar's worth of yogurt (Rei picked it for him, allegedly for its nutritional value) when they heard steps. Slow, unsteady steps.

Both heads slowly turned to behold a hunched-over figure stumbling across their field of view, face completely obscured by tangled blonde hair.

Without a word, the figure disappeared towards the bathroom.

Kaworu silently swallowed and glanced at Shephard, but the man didn't seem to be angry.

Or maybe just wasn't showing it. He didn't know either way and figured that this wasn't a good time
to practice the mind-reading shenanigans Rei has been teaching him.

He was about to resume eating when the sound of loud retching came from the bathroom.

"...that doesn't sound good."

"It happens."

Kaworu glanced up at the adult again, but nothing changed. The man seemed almost nonchalant at hearing his daughter being more than a little sick. Then again, Kaworu was never quite that drunk as Asuka seemed to be right now, so maybe he was overestimating the whole thing.

Another retching sound came from the bathroom's direction, but it was no longer accompanied by the splashing Kaworu heard earlier. And considering how Shephard looked up with a frown, it wasn't a good sign.

Kaworu just watched with his head firmly tucked between his shoulders as the man stood up and went to the bathroom. He heard Shephard eventually come back out and left the kitchen just in time to see him carry a visibly wet-haired Asuka into the living room, smeared vomit trailing down her cheeks.

"Serves you right." – Shephard muttered, laying her down onto the sofa. – "Now stay put or I swear I'll glue your ass here." – All he got in response was somewhere halfway between a growl and a groan.

"I don't want to sound like a jerk, but... didn't you say that you won't excuse her from school?" – Kaworu asked from the doorway.

"That was before I found her lying in a pool of her own puke. She's not going anywhere."

...that was most definitely a degree of intoxication Kaworu never experience before. Not even close. Nor did he particularly want to, seeing how visibly weak Asuka was as her limbs limply hung off the edge of the sofa.

"Gee, how considerate..." – came a muttered snark from Asuka's direction.

"Shut up, missy." – Shephard replied in a tone that was more annoyed that worried. – "I'm so going to kick your ass if you pull a stunt like this again."

"Wha's wid dis unh'ly fixation wid ma 'ss?" – the girl slurred in a pained tone, curling up into a fetal pose.

Though mouthing off while catastrophically hungover was what Kaworu half-expected from Asuka anyway, it still surprised him to some degree. Not a hint of sheepishness, embarrassment or humility. Either she didn't give a damn she messed up or she knew but didn't show. He couldn't tell in either case.

"So she's staying?"

"Yeah and I'm staying too."

"Don't you have work?"

"I do, but look at her!" – Shephard thumbed at Asuka over his shoulder. – "She can't even go to the loo on her own, do you really think we should leave her alone all day?"
"I could stay." – Kaworu offered. – "I'm pretty sure me missing one day isn't as big of a deal as you doing so."

"Kid... I can't ask that of you."

"You don't have to. It's my fault she's like this."

"I already told you not to worry about it. Plus I can excuse her from school, but not you."

"No, it's okay. I'll look after her."

Shephard opened his mouth to respond but whatever he was about to say was interrupted by the doorbell.

Kaworu glanced in that direction. – "Rei's here early."

"Might not be her." – Shephard remarked as he moved to answer the door.

"Then who?"

"Did you forget about my girl's friends?"

It clicked in Kaworu's head that it was only a matter of time until Hikari and Mari would be missed by someone. And as it would seem, it was that time already.

"I don't know whether I should be the one to apologize or Asuka. I mean, it was her fault but I did leave her unsupervised."

"It's not a problem, really. Hikari's not stupid; I'm pretty sure she learned whatever there was to learn from this."

If he hadn't heard the conversation, Kaworu would've guessed the new arrival walking into the kitchen alongside Shephard was a relative of Mari's, based on the glasses and chest size.

"Oh, hi. You're the princely exotic beauty I keep hearing about from the girls?"

"They call him that?" – Shephard asked in a '...huh?!' tone.

"No, I'm just paraphrasing." – the older girl (or young woman? Kaworu couldn't quite decide) replied without diverting her attention away from Kaworu. – "But better watch out all the same, or Mari will get into your pants faster than light. Kodama Horaki, nice to meet you."

"Uh, Kaworu Nagisa."

"Huh. I seem to recall they said you're a foreigner."

"I am... kinda. I don't really know myself, it's a long story."

"Guys, guys..." – came a groan from Asuka's direction, causing all three to look in the girl's direction and find her huddled up in the same fetal pose she was in when her father put her there, clutching the side of her head. – "Not so loud. Please. Thank you."

The other three shared a look. – "She's in pretty bad shape." – Shephard whispered to Kodama.

"I can see that. Been hungover myself before."
Kaworu sighed. – "Has everyone in this house been hungover before except for me, or what?"

Shephard shrugged. – "Hey, be glad you haven't."

"How did she get so drunk, anyway?" – Kodama asked Kaworu.

"Drinking contest. Makinami tricked her into trying to outdrink me."

"Kid says he never gets drunk." – Shephard supplied. – "I call bullshit on that, but he was definitely sober when I called him last night."

"Are you immune to alcohol or something?"

Kaworu shrugged. – "I don't know."

"Anyway, I'll be taking Mari too, like we talked about it on the phone." – Kodama stated, this time addressing Shephard.

"Right. Not sure if they're up yet, so feel free to wake them up."

At this point, Kaworu decided that the rest of their conversation likely didn't concern him. That, and he didn't want to test whether Shephard really wasn't pissed or just pretending he wasn't by getting in the way one too many times and potentially setting him off.

"Hey, kid. I'm leaving."

"Okay."

For what it's worth, neither Mari or Hikari made much of a ruckus when they left. Hikari definitely did not sound pleased that she was forced to call in sick despite being class representative and Mari's attempts at soothing her only made her even angrier, considering that Mari was the one ultimately responsible for the situation.

This actually make Kaworu breathe a sigh of relief. If she would've been blaming him... he didn't want to think about the repercussions.

"Keep an eye on her, will you?"

"Right."

"I called the doc's girl and told her you're staying, so don't expect her. If Asuka asks for something for her headache, give her water. No pills, just water."

He waited until he heard the entrance door closing before getting up. Passing by the living room on his way to the kitchen for a drink (of the non-alcoholic kind, that is), he glanced at Asuka but she was still where and how they left her; sleeping, maybe. He couldn't tell. Which was still better than her accusing him of having rigged the drinking contest somehow.

As he was trying to figure out what to do instead of school, Kaworu realized with some embarrassment that he didn't actually have anything to occupy himself with for the next couple of hours (or until Shephard got back home). He could go back to bed, but he guessed being asleep wouldn't really fit the requirement of him keeping an eye on Asuka. Ditto with his hobby, as he couldn't just toss a several hundred degrees hot soldering iron aside if she were to suddenly start choking on her own vomit or some other emergency that required his immediate intervention, seeing as he didn't feel like setting his own room on fire for her sake.
He could just study from his textbooks, seeing as he was supposed to be at school anyway, but Kaworu understandably didn't feel like studying simply because he had nothing better to do. However, that did give him an idea.

After checking that Asuka was still the way they left her on his way back from the kitchen, Kaworu briefly paused between their rooms before quietly opening the door to hers and stepping in.

He was half-expecting her to be a bit of a slob, but that didn't seem to be the case. Or maybe it was because of the company she had yesterday made her tidy up a bit. Either way, the room was quite a bit cleaner than his (which was faint praise indeed, he had no shame in admitting), with only one discarded set of clothes littering the floor and only a small pile of empty junk food packaging on the desk. And from what he could tell, Asuka didn't seem to have a habit of packing her school bag on the night before a school day.

But it wasn't her textbooks he was interested in; he had all of it himself, except for maybe puberty-related biology handbooks he had seen handed out in his previous school about two years back and which he, unlike some other boys in his old class, had no interest in. He guessed that maybe, just maybe, Asuka would happen to have a book or two he could pass his time with. Kaworu had no such possessions himself, so he had to borrow. And besides, this was the least she could do after she nearly got him into trouble.

And sure enough, she seemed to have about a dozen books lined up on a shelf. He could only hope she wasn't into sappy romance novels or such... because if she was, he might just go fetch a school textbook after all.

Then his eyes paused on a relatively thin book with a red cover. Carefully pulling it out from between two thicker books, Kaworu's eyebrows went up at the title: Der Röte Kampfflieger. A quick peek beyond the cover showed that it wasn't actually in German, though, which was fine by him. A book's a book and all that matters is that it's in a language he can read, even if the interior of the cover stated it was a retranslation of something from 1918.

Thus, he went back to the living room, sat down on the couch opposite of Asuka, cracked the book open at the preface and started reading.

Kaworu then summarily lost track of time up until the point where he heard Asuka grumble – "That's mine."

He looked up to see her glaring at him from where she was lying. – "Hm?"

"I said that's mine. Are you deaf?"

"No."

"If you go into my room again, you're dead."

Kaworu shrugged. – "Well, I had to do something. I too get bored, you know."

"It's not about boredom, it's about 'my stuff is not your stuff.'" – Asuka growled. – "Are you seriously that dense, or just a kleptomaniac?"

"If I was a kleptomaniac, do you think I'd flaunt it?"

The blonde opened her mouth to respond, but visibly paused before actually doing so. – "...point. Just give it back when you're done."
"I wasn't going to keep it."

"Good."

"Was this guy your childhood hero or something?"

"No. It's just a book written by a guy who's been dead for more than 120 years."

"Why did you borrow his moniker for your hobbies, then?"

Asuka turned to her other side, facing the backrest. – "Cause it sounded cool."

Kaworu wasn't sure if he believed her; the analog indicator was leaning more towards the 'no' end of the scale on that.

Shrugging, he resumed reading (he made it quite far into the book, he realized) until he heard her again. – "You're German too, aren't you?"

"Austrian." – he corrected, putting the book down. – "Not that it matters much, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there haven't been an Austria since Second Impact and I apparently have a Japanese name, so I'm not native there anyway." – he clarified with a shrug.

"With how you look like, I can't even tell if you're Asian or not."

"Apparently you're not alone with that. Tôji asked too when I came here."

He heard her scoff. – "Suzuhara wouldn't be able to tell his own ancestry if he looked in a mirror."

"Speak for yourself. Your dad said you have some Japanese blood yourself."

"What about it?"

"Your hair makes it hard to tell too. I never would've guessed it myself."

Asuka sighed with a hint of tired exasperation. – "Listen... if you're trying to woo me by complimenting on my looks, don't bother. I've heard that enough times already."

"I'm not interested in that stuff."

A momentary silence descended over them before Asuka glanced at him above her shoulder.

"...are you gay?"

"No!" – Kaworu sputtered. – "I just... I don't care much for all this dating and romance and sex stuff. I mean, why is everyone all crazy about it? It's as if their whole world revolved around getting laid."

"Bullshit."

"I'm serious."

"And I'm an idiot who takes that at face value." – She turned to fully face him. – "Why did you leave and come here, anyway?"

"I, uh... I got expelled from school."
At that, Kaworu saw Asuka assume a '...what.' expression so bizarrely like Shephard that she almost looked like a younger version of the man. – "Seriously?"

"...yeah."

"You mean to tell me you only made it a few weeks into high school before you got yourself kicked out?"

"One week, if it matters."

"What did you do?"

Kaworu's look darkened. – "Someone tried to extort a friend of mine for cash. He refused, so they beat him up so badly he's crippled for life. Ringleader got away with it because he was the son of our school's principal... but the fucker's luck ran out when he tried to shake me down too and ended up in the hospital for his trouble."

Asuka just stared at him.

"What?"

"I don't think I ever heard you swear before." – the girl remarked.

"Well, I'm not going to cry for him. He got what he deserved. The guy I beat up, I mean."

"What, are you some kind of vigilante hero wannabe or something?"

Kaworu shook his head. – "I'm nothing like that. Just an ordinary guy."

"Ordinary guys don't nearly kill people for hurting someone close to them."

"I wasn't trying to kill them." – He leaned back, eyes glancing up at the ceiling. – "I don't like bullies... no matter where they're from."

"How does that make you any better than them?"

Kaworu looked back down at that. – "What do you mean?"

"You beat them up, they beat others up." – Asuka remarked. – "What's the difference?"

"Helping someone else versus helping yourself."

"Ends justify the means?"

"That's not it. If the little guys can't stand up for themselves, who will?"

"And if it's the little guys who are being the bullies? Then what?"

Kaworu's brain promptly ground to a halt at the girl's counter-argument. Because for all he tried, he found no flaw in her logic. Stopping the strong from abusing the weak is one thing – but if he can do that by virtue of being even stronger, isn't he doing the same thing he abhors?

Of course, he wasn't going to feel remorse for that boy. What's deserved is deserved. But that didn't mean he didn't get the message.

"...then if I beat them up, I am the bully." – he said finally.
He could see a faint smirk in the corner of her mouth, although he couldn't tell if it was mocking or not. – "There may be hope for you yet."

Kodama's appearance is based upon recently released artwork by Sadamoto. Before that one, there has been no official depictions of either her or Nozomi, only unofficial ones... and not all of them of the safe-for-work kind.
Geofront, AEL Headquarters
December 9, 2041

"I see." – Keel's image nodded in the holographic window above Yui's desk. – "I'm pleased to hear that my trust in you was not misplaced."

"Unit-02 is fully combat ready." – Yui replied, beginning to close the other windows her terminal was sharing across the connection. – "And with the additional funding, we will shortly begin installation of Unit-03's cybernetic augmentations, along with those of the Beta prototype."

"Oh? I don't believe I have heard of that one before."

"Our company has been developing a recombinant somatotropin derivative for inducing rapid cellular mitosis. It's primarily intended for medical usage, although it is not yet ready for human trials; however, we have been testing it on one of Unit-00's eggs and the results are truly remarkable."

While it was rather hard to tell due to the man's visor, Yui thought she could see Keel's forehead wrinkle in the way characteristic to someone raising their eyebrows. – "Eggs? Evangelions are capable of reproduction?"

"Theoretically yes. The mechanism involved appears to be similar to seahorses and certain species of frogs, although we do not know much more about it; studying it in-depth was obviously not a priority. In any case, the egg in question was fertilized parthenogenetically and incubated in an amniotic tank just like the others, with the only environmental difference being the embryo's exposure to the formula." – Yui explained. – "Within a month, the subject's size and physiological development was ten times beyond what it should have been, based on prior observational data."

"It grew faster?"

"Indeed, and although it has eventually reached a size where we could no longer administer enough of the formula to keep up the speed of growth, it has still grown to full physical maturity in a fraction of a time it would've otherwise. We hope this can be used to speed up mass production later on."

"Provided it enters mass production in the first place, of course." – Keel remarked.

Yui nodded with certainty. – "It will. The power to lay waste to entire armies without the indiscriminate collateral damage of a nuclear weapon is something I'm certain the army will be eager to have."

"Question is... are humans worthy of commanding that kind of power at their fingertips?"

Now it was Yui's turn to be surprised at the turn this conversation has taken, though it wasn't something she wasn't ready to answer. – "It's not a matter of whether we can, mister president. It's a matter of humanity needing a defense against a possible future Combine invasion. If there is anything we've learned from the Seven Hour War, it's that it is not enough to merely achieve parity with our enemies. Posturing, intimidation, deterrence tactics and gunboat diplomacy might work against fellow humans, but attempting the same against someone with far more resources and manpower at their disposal is a laughable proposition. Simply put, speaking softly and carrying a big stick is worthless if the other side has the bigger stick." – Which wasn't very far from the way she lead the company ever since she became its chairwoman. No matter how many years have elapsed since women's rights became a thing, she still found that sometimes, she had to go an extra mile or two just
to be taken seriously.

Though it also needed to be said that sometimes, being underestimated for being a woman worked in her favor during business deals, so she couldn't complain. More than once did she sit down to deal with people who evidently prepared for someone who got her position via nepotism or as someone else's puppet... only to discover the hard way that she's very much competent and on the lookout for someone trying to rip her off. She wasn't greedy or anything; she just preferred to get the most bang for her buck, so to speak, without outright ripping off the other side so that they wouldn't reconsider doing further business with her company in the future.

"The Combine could afford to lose control over a single planet; we could not because this was the only one we had." – Yui continued. – "It was do or die. Even with all the offworld infrastructure we now have, the colonies are still dependent on Earth and hold less than 3% of the total population. Even though we had beaten them back once, they know where we are. All it takes is one xenium experiment going wrong and they will be kicking down our door with a vengeance for resisting assimilation. We can't run and we can't hide, so all we can do is dig in our heels and hold the line."

Keel hummed in an almost bemused way. – "Cannon to right of then, cannon to left of them, cannon in front of them, volleyed and thundered; stormd at with shot and shell, boldly they rode as well... into the jaws of Death, into the mouth of Hell."

Seemed like there was no shortage of surprises when Keel was involved, Yui thought inwardly. – "Let us hope things will never come to that."

"Indeed. Is there anything else, doktor?"

And now came the moment Yui dreaded ever since their call connected. – "Actually... a rather uncomfortable matter has come up. As much as I loathe to, I need to ask for a favor."

"Oh?"

"The test pilots for all three currently active Evangelion prototypes... are all school-age." – She paused and braced herself at his outrage.

Which never came. Instead, Keel just silently motioned for her to continue.

"As you are no doubt aware, last week's national holiday was worked off this Saturday, as per the ministry of education's decision. While I've been trying to schedule all tests to take place after school and on weekends so as to not interfere with their education, due to... health-related matters on the part of one of the pilots, she and another one have been unable to attend school this Saturday. The school's administration is unaware of their employment at our company and if possible, I would prefer to keep it that way for the time being so as to not attract undue public attention that might distract the pilots from performing their duties. Therefore, I need you to have the ministry lean on the principal that no questions are to be asked regarding these three's absences. I'm transferring a copy of their personnel files now." – she finished as she did just that before leaning back and watching as Keel looked to the side.

"I see you included your daughter as well." – he remarked.

"She has been part of the project for several years now. If you cross-reference the national intelligence quotient evaluation results, you will see that we could have hardly made a better choice. Her combat skills and piloting skill have been proven to be extraordinary as well, including the elimination of the first Angel in solo combat with minimal equipment. As of now, she is our most experienced and senior pilot."
He nodded before visibly switching to the next file. — "And lieutenant colonel Shephard's daughter?"

"I'm told that she has mock battle experience with current military equipment. I recruited her primarily for cross-reference purposes and that decision is already paying off, seeing as how she supplied us with ideas regarding offworld deployment." — And if Keel had any problems with her age, he should direct it to the junior battleframe league first. Not that she said that out loud, of course.

"I see."

"As for the third one, he's... a special case. He's a civilian who got caught up with the first Angel's attack. Seeing as we needed a pilot for Unit-01 anyway, I hired him as an incentive to keep his lips sealed."

"Are you sure he's trustworthy?" — Keel posed the obvious question.

"He's given me no reason to doubt him so far."

"And if he does?"

Yui had to actively restrain herself from visibly swallowing. — "I will take whatever measures are necessary to maintain operational security." 'And hope to God that never happens.'

She was neither blind nor stupid. She was fully aware how much time Rei was spending with him outside work and school, which likely meant that the girl knew about him already. And if she knew, Kaworu likely knew as well. The only question was, exactly how much he knew? Yui didn't notice any change in his demeanor (unlike Rei, who became almost possessive of him, silently observing his sync tests from the back of the observation room whenever she wasn't having one herself), but she had no way of knowing without actually asking. And if she asked and it turned out he didn't know, he'd know that she's hiding something from him. Getting suspicious was one thing; the greater issue was that he would tell Rei about it and Yui had no way of telling how the girl would react.

She still remembered the vacant, almost dead stare from a three year old sitting in the sterile white room, almost completely unresponsive to her surroundings or the scientists' queries and orders. That was from a child who not yet understood loss and not yet had the power to do something about it... but things have changed. Rei was older now. Still not an adult, but getting close. And if there was one thing teenagers outdid adults at, it was being emotional. Even normal teens would've been a handful at this age, but Rei definitely wasn't normal.

And if her theoretical capabilities weren't just theoretical... Yui did not want to think about what the girl would do to all of them if they tried to separate her from Kaworu again.

But Yui naturally couldn't just tell that to Keel. Creating the Evangelions already drew criticism from some of the more hardliner members of the military, but if it came to light what she did to those two, said criticism would pale in comparison to their reaction to that. They wouldn't just call for her to be removed and replaced with someone trustworthy, they'd be calling for her blood. Or worse.

Even now, alarm bells were ringing in her head. She outright admitted to hiring and deploying child soldiers right to the face of the head of state - and he didn't even care. The very survival of humanity was being entrusted to a trio of teenagers and the man with humanity's entire military at his beck and call had precisely zero objections to it. Or even questions beyond the pilots' basic qualifications. As intelligent as she herself was, Yui never ignored her gut feeling out of hand.

And right now, she was having a very, very bad gut feeling about that man.
Snow cracked under the man's feet, bodyguards flanking him from both sides. Ahead of them loomed the slightly decrepit warehouse building that was their destination. Nothing unusual for them; after all, their particular... line of work frequently saw them visiting such places, thanks to their clientele of choice.

What was unusual this time was said clientele being pushy enough to quite literally fight their way through the man's guards in order to deal with him. Usually, his reputation was enough to prevent such things - but not this time, it would seem.

As they approached, the building's main door loudly creaked open to let them in. Yet as soon as they were through, it closed right back up, leaving them encased in the near-complete darkness broken only by dirty upper-floor windows that provided nowhere near enough illumination for ground level.

Such things did not cause the man any concerns. He was familiar with intimidation tactics, for it was a part of his job.

A pair of lamps switched on before them, illuminating an elongated circle of ground between him and the desk said lamps sat upon, angled in such a way that he could see the vaguely human shape sitting at the desk and another shape standing next to him, yet couldn't see their faces due to the glare of the lamps. Clever.

"護衛は必要ありません." – came a woman's voice from beyond the desk.

The man glanced at his bodyguards. – "滞在することは好むだ."  

"お前に害を与えたければ、我らわ顔をそろえていないよ."  

The figure in the seat gestured, prompting the other one to lean in. What words they exchanged was inaudible to the man but soon enough, the woman straightened back up.

"Mister Ishida would like to know if you've brought the funds."

He raised an eyebrow at her sudden switch to English from her perfectly unaccented Japanese. – "I'm standing right here. He can ask me himself."

"Have you or have you not?"

"I have."

"Show me."

The figure standing next to the desk walked forward, revealing herself to be that blue-haired girl who somehow put two of his men in the hospital a month before. Not that the hospital asked questions; they knew who he was and took his money just like everyone else. Money and reputation were the two things that moved everyone forward in the world. And he was not in short supply of either, although not at the top of the food chain.

Yet.

The man raised the briefcase he was carrying and undid the lock, flipping the case open so that the girl can examine the contents.
For what it's worth, she didn't take much time with it. – "The amount is correct."

"Of course it is."

He re-locked it and passed it to her, his coat sleeve momentarily revealing an elaborate oriental tattoo on the back of his hand until he dropped his hand to his side.

"It would be in your best interest to not attempt tracing my identity. Attempt to blackmail me and the consequences will not be pleasant."

He genuinely couldn't decide whether to be annoyed or incredulous. – "Are you threatening me?"

"Do I have to resort to it? Or are you willing to conduct business without it?"

Or maybe he should be impressed. Either this girl was an idiot or had serious balls to talk to him like that. Then again, she did rough up two of his men. – "I am. Just remember that the conditions we agreed upon."

"Will be upheld."

"Quite so. Don't think for even a second that we'll give you a free pass for trying to screw us over just because you're a kid."

"Agreed. Yet my warning still stands: attempt to discover our identities and Yamagishi-dono will have to look for a replacement."

Seriously, the nerve of this girl. Talking down to him was one thing, but namedropping his boss? He most definitely underestimated her caliber. – "I'll make sure to let him know."

If she noticed his sarcasm, she didn't show it. – "In which case you may also wish to convey Mister Ishida's displeasure at two of Yamagishi-dono's men having overzealously attempted to prevent us doing business with him. As their master, their behavior reflects negatively on Yamagishi-dono's honor."

The man's eyes narrowed dangerously at that, and so did those of his bodyguards. – "Do not question Yamagishi-dono's honor."

"Then do not give us a reason to." – With that, she turned her back to him and walked back to the desk where her benefactor sat in silence, still shrouded by the lamps' glare. – "Our deal is concluded. You may leave."

"You give me leave? You are badly in need of learning respect."

"So do you. Until his first scheduled payment, Mister Ishida has nothing more to say to you."

As soon as the warehouse door closed back up, Kaworu let out a shaky breath and leaned back in the chair. – "Herrgott nochmal, du fast gab mir einen Herzinfarkt..."

Rei just stood next to him in silence.

"Rei, next time you deal with a cranky mafioso, stop egging him on!"

"He's Yakuza, not mafia."

"Same thing!"
"It's not."

He let out another sigh, trying to calm his frayed nerves. – "I... I thought he was going to shoot you there for a minute."

"He thought about it, but chose not to. If he would have tried, I would have killed him first." – Rei checked the briefcase to see if it was properly locked. – "We should leave. His appearance in person will no doubt attract attention."

"Alright." – Kaworu got up and followed her on her way to the rear exit, opposite of the direction their prior company left. – "I'm still not sure about this, to be honest. I mean, I could've afforded everything from my salary."

"That may be so, but a large sum being transferred off your account would attract too much attention. Not just to your person, but to the AEL as well. Your repayment, however, should be small enough at a time to avoid attention for now."

Kaworu shook his head as he closed the door behind himself, squinting from the sun's glare on the snow around them being more than a little uncomfortable after the dark warehouse interior. – "All this just to buy that basement... I wonder what the others will think."

"It does not matter." – Rei replied, sweeping off the thin layer of fresh snow off the seat of her motorbike. – "Even if they leave you, I will not."

"You don't have to." – Kaworu muttered, settling behind her on the vehicle.

"It is not a matter of must." – She started the engine. – "It is a matter of choice."

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Keel's quote was from Tennyson's Charge of the Light Brigade. It was written about a real event during the Crimean War when a British light cavalry unit was ordered to charge down a Russian artillery unit attempting to retreat with cannons captured from a fortified position but due to the soldier delivering the orders failing to pass them on unambiguously, they charged the enemy's lines dead center and got caught in a three-way artillery crossfire. As the poem highlights, the soldiers likely knew that it was suicidal to charge light cavalry into that kind of killzone (even heavy cavalry would've had problems because by the 19th century, cannons were devastatingly accurate) but not one of them objected. In the end, the unit managed to reach the artillery line and chased the Russian gunners from their positions, but didn't have enough fighting strength left to hold the position and the lieutenant general in charge of British cavalry operations in the theater decided to withhold the heavy cavalry and merely support the light cav's retreat with them - thus the light cav abandoned the charge and withdrew, allowing the gunners to re-man the cannons and shoot them in the back as they retreated.

The soldier who delivered the order incorrectly was ironically among the first to die when the Russian artillery opened up on the Light Brigade, last seen running across the unit's front as if he realized his error and tried to stop the charge.
Chapter 35

Tokyo-2, Outer District 6
January 6, 2042
0714 hours

"Right, I'll tell them." – Shepard put down the phone before he walked back to the kitchen. – "Good news, kids. School's canceled for this week."

Asuka looked up from her breakfast with surprise. – "Why?"

The man thumbed at the general direction of 'outside'. – "Snow. Not everyone can get their parents to take them to school in a car, so they figured it's better if everyone stays home until the weather improves."

"They cancel school for that?"

"Yep. Never would've thought they'd do this outside typhoon season, but apparently they do."

"Awesome." – the girl enthused with the honest smirk of a teenager who just got told she didn't have to go to school.

"They did it where I used to live too." – Kaworu added. – "Cancel school when the winter got hard, I mean."

Shephard turned to him. – "Wasn't it next to the Alps, though?"

"It was."

"That's different. Heavy snow next to a big mountain range is one thing, but on an island? Back in my day, I've never seen this much snow outside skiing grounds."

"You can ski?"

"Dunno." – the man replied with a shrug. – "It's been a long time and the colonies aren't exactly teeming with snow either. Well, except for Eidothea but I was never posted there. Good thing, too."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to get my ass frozen off. I hear Siberian winters can hit three digits in the negative now, but Eidothea's colder than that. It's apparently so cold that all the gaseous crap you can find in petrol and such-"

"Like methane." – Asuka supplied.

"-- thank you -- just liquefy and pool together into rivers and seas." – He chuckled. – "Fifty years ago, the oil companies would've jizzed themselves for a chance to tap the place... right before their balls would've fallen off like icicles."

Asuka sighed. – "And you were waiting to use that line for how long, exactly?"

"Longer than they lived, that's for sure."

Kaworu shifted uneasily in his chair. – "That's... kinda harsh. I mean... you know... speak ill of the
"Look, kid..." – Shephard crossed his hands with a heavy sigh that held no annoyance, only resignation of the kind the teen didn't think he ever heard from an adult. – "Dead people are dead people. I can't do a thing about it. If I could, I would, but I can't. Way I look at it, we owe it to them to live our life to the fullest and have fun. Not just our share, theirs too. Because if we don't, what's the point of the rest of us having survived? Besides... I don't think they'd want us to be all doom and gloom 'woe us and ours forevermore'. I'm not saying that we shouldn't mourn them; I'm saying we should keep our heads high to show the fuckers responsible that they can butcher us, but they ain't gonna break us. Not now, not ever."

"Translation: kicking said fuckers' asses and having fun doing it aren't mutually exclusive." – Asuka added.

"That too. Anyway..." – Shephard pushed back his chair. – "I think I should get going. You kids are gonna be OK?"

Asuka moved to get up as well. – "I'm going back to bed, for one."

"Which, by the way, is not an open invitation." – With that, she walked out of the kitchen.

"I can find my own bed just fine, thank you." – the boy called after her.

"Just so you won't forget."

Kaworu just sighed and glanced at Shephard. – "You'd think she would've gotten the message that I got the message by now."

"That's Asuka for ya."

"What's that supposed to mean?" – came the girl's voice from the living room's direction.

"It means I don't envy whoever's gonna marry you down the line."

"What makes you think I ever gonna marry?"

"It's that kids say all kinds of shit they end up not doing. So... yeah."

Half an hour later, Kaworu paused rereading his math textbook on his bed to let his mind wander.

It's been said that the start of a new year is a good time for reflection. Of what the past brought, of decisions made, of hindsight on both. For him, the last year brought nothing but change upon change. To say that he didn't expect half of it just a year ago (or half a year ago, even) would be a major understatement; being conscripted to fight against house-sized aliens was one thing, finding out that he's some kind of psychic and has a similarly empowered twin sister (judging from the fact that they had the same birthday) was another.

To be fair, it's not as if he brought it upon himself. For the most part, all he could do was just whip his head back and forth at development after development; just drifting with the flow, so to speak. What else could he do? He wasn't in control of events; drifting with the flow was all he could do.

"It's your own fault for letting everyone tug you around."

Kaworu's head perked up at Tabris' snort. – "What do you mean?"

"Everyone's just pulling your strings and you're going along with it. I don't know if you're stupid,
imperceptive or just unmotivated."

"You think they have ulterior motives?"

Kaworu had a feeling that if he could see Tabris, he would've seen the Angel roll its eyes just now. – "Who doesn't? Like that girl who claims she's your sister. You took that practically at face value. Did it not occur to you that she might be lying?"

"For what?" – the teen retorted. – "I'm not rich, powerful, influential or anyone else worth manipulating; I'm nobody."

"Correction: WAS a nobody. Then you joined up and she suddenly and conveniently remembers that she had a brother."

"Well, she did have that old photo."

"And? It could be forged."

Kaworu rolled his eyes at that. – "Which would go awfully far to get me to behave. If you have a point, say it."

"I'm just warning you to watch your back. Like it or not, you're in a position where you can make things happen. Just because you and your comrade destroyed one Ramiel does not mean the Others will give up."

"Why are they coming here, anyway? What is it here that we want? I mean, you guys can live in space just fine, right? No air or anything?"

"Yes."

"Then why? You don't need our planet, you don't need our stuff. There are eight planets in this system alone, plus a bunch of other planets in other systems. Why go to the one where they get shot at? And why keep coming back?" – Kaworu stretched his legs as he mulled over the matter, before an unpleasant memory popped into his mind. – "Is it that spear you want?"

"We'd never be able to even touch it." – Tabris replied dismissively.

"Why?"

"Because only Lilim can. I'm honestly surprised it let you use it despite my presence; I fully expected it to obliterate our very souls. From the very beginning of our service to the Eternal, we Angels are told that Sealing Weapons are impossible to handle by those who do not belong in the world of their master. I don't know if this one failed to detect me over the Evangelion or just ignored me because of my current state... whatever the case, I don't know how your kind got your hands on this particular one, but I am relieved beyond words it did not consider me a target to be eliminated."

"How powerful is it, exactly?" – Not that he remembered any of it, but Kaworu had seen the camera footage. That was enough for him to believe Tabris; getting stabbed by a knife the size of a building was one thing, being utterly obliterated by a blast on the level of a nuclear weapon was a whole another. Especially since there was nothing he had seen on the pictures that indicated machinery of any kind. Nothing but a completely smooth surface with an almost metallic quality, as if it couldn't just suddenly liquefy and change shape into something else before, in Shephard's words, 'going Death Star' (not that Kaworu didn't know that particular reference; some classics never ceased being classics, no matter how much time went by).
"I don't know. The only Sealing Weapon I have ever seen is the Eternal's, and even that I have never seen with its power unleashed. All I know is that the quickening of life from nothingness and returning that life into nothingness are equally within its grasp."

"That sounds like the kind of power one would ascribe to a god."

"For once, I agree." – Tabris replied.

"And what did you mean by 'your current state'?"

"...if from nothing else, you likely figured out from that time I mentioned having been on this planet before that I wasn't always just a disembodied voice in someone's head. I used to be a form of existence just like any other Angel."

"What happened?"

"The Others happened. Let's just say that they know where their loyalties lie." – the Angel replied cryptically.

Two walls away, Asuka turned to her other side underneath the blanket.

Outside, snow continued to fall.

Kilometers beneath them, Yui sipped her coffee as technicians continued their work amidst the quietly humming terminals.

Far beyond the hills to the northeast of Tokyo-2, the birds that huddled together for warmth in the snow-covered cityscape of Tokyo scattered in every direction when a deafening bang echoed across the buildings from far above, accompanied by a pressure wave of displaced air that shattered what few windows were left in the vicinity.

All that is continued to be as it always had been and as it always will be... unaware of the endless river now flowing in a different riverbed.

"Huh...?"

"What is it?"

"Radar shows a bogey at angels nine over old Tokyo. No transponder."
"Where did it come from?"

"I've got no idea, it wasn't there ten seconds ago. Radar picked it up in the lower stratosphere, falling straight down at terminal velocity with no control. You think we ought to report this?"

"Nah, probably just trash ejected by a civilian ship or something. I mean, it's spinwise from Kyoto."

"I don't know. Trajectory doesn't look like a meteor and the gear didn't pick it up until it got this low. You think it's that thing they told us to watch out for?"

"Hold on..." – A pause. – "No gravimetric spike. Whatever it is, it's not what we're looking out for. Hell, judging from how close it was before we spotted it, it's probably some stealth shit the navy's testing out or something. Either way, it's not our problem and you can bet your ass this shift ain't gonna get interesting all of a sudden. Luck ain't that merciful."

"Yeah, you're right."

---

Tokyo, Shinjuku Special Ward
1143 hours

A brief respite in the snowfall was accompanied by a brief break in the cloud cover, allowing the midday sun to shine through and onto the irregularly-shaped mound lying in a sizable crater ringed by half-collapsed buildings.

White metal gleamed in the sunlight, nearly impossible to tell apart from the snow.

Then one side of the mound abruptly shifted, triggering a minor avalanche that created a sizable pile of snow beneath the metal cylinder which emerged from the mound. A hatch opened slowly at the base of the cylinder, fluid dripping down at the edge to create starkly contrasting orange spots on the snow below.

Then the figure of a hooded teen emerged from the opening, cautiously peeking around with a fearful expression. – "Janus, are you sure it's okay...?"

"Confirmed. Atmospheric composition is habitable."

"But... how? We're on a planet, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Unknown. However, I am picking up significant communications traffic on USL military frequencies."

Alarm flashed across the girl's face before her breath was interrupted by another voice. – "Any alerts?" – She turned around to reveal another teenager, who leaned out of the hatch and squinted as the sharp winter wind ruffled his blonde hair.

"Are you alright?" – the girl asked, voice tinged with worry.

"I'm fine. Janus?"

"No alerts. I am not detecting outlying patrols either."
The boy glanced down at the fifteen meter drop below the hatch... then braced himself and leaped out, soaring through the cold air before landing with enough force to knock up a massive cloud of snow. Yet before the cloud even settled, he was walking out of it as if he hadn't just landed on his feet from a drop that would've broken an ordinary person's legs without a parachute or wading through knee-deep snow – and behind him, the girl landed with the same result, albeit pausing for a moment to individually shake both legs afterwards with a silently mouthed 'Ow.'

They looked around at the desolate cityscape in silence before the girl let out a frustrated sigh. – "I don't get it! Where are we?! This looks just like a winter cycle on the Shekinah, but no subsection is so... so..." – She gestured around them.

"Dead?"

"Yeah. And how did we get here, anyway?"

"I brought you here."

Both teens whirled around to see a small sphere with black and white tiger stripes pop into existence in the air.

"I need you to do something." – Leliel continued.

"Fuck off." – the boy snapped instantly.

"...that was quick. You're not really in a position to refuse, you know."

"Why not?"

"Well, reality would collapse in a cataclysmic causality breakdown, for one. But seeing as you're still here, I already know you're going to play ball, so you can quit pretending to refuse now." – The white lines across Leliel shifted and rearranged into an uncannily good impression of a smirk as she stared right into the boy's blood-red eyes. – "Paradoxes are nothing but convenient in that regard, wouldn't you agree...?"

'Angels' is air force lingo for altitude, originally measured in thousands of feet; here, it means kilometers instead. According to The Bruneval Raid: Flashpoint of the Radar War, the term originated from the Battle of Britain, the first historical conflict that involved radar operators guiding fighter pilots on interception sorties via radio. Since radio is never quite as clear as live speech, even without atmospheric noise and geomagnetic storms caused by solar activity muddling the signal, brevity and clearly understandable language is key.

Ambiguous phrasing between crew and ground controller was the primary cause of the 1977 Tenerife disaster, where a civilian airliner's crew, already on edge from being delayed, were given instructions to follow after takeoff but interpreted it as permission to take off and acknowledged it as such, but the ground controller, not seeing the runway due to thick fog, interpreted it as acknowledgment of holding at the end of the runway waiting for permission to take off. Problem is, another airliner was taxiing on the same runway and using the same radio frequency, so they tried hollering at the other plane to wait with that takeoff because they're in the way - but broadcasting on the same frequency meant that the two planes basically jammed each other's radio, resulting in the first airliner not hearing the controller explicitly ordering them to wait for takeoff clearance AND neither the first airliner nor the ground controller hearing the second
airliner's alert that they're still on the runway. 583 people died in the collision, including both aircrews.
Tokyo-2, Outer District 6
January 7, 2042
1128 hours

Kaworu waved the tin smoke away, put the soldering tin back onto its stand and flipped its transformer off. If there was one upside to risking his life on a regular basis, it was that he at least got paid for it. Being able to buy high-quality soldering tin and unused parts went a long way towards making his hobby less stressful. That said, his pay was considerably higher than what he spent on food and hobby things; month by month, he was accumulating a significant surplus on his account. He wasn't a millionaire yet by any means, but he had little doubt that by the end of the year, he would be.

In his idle moments he sometimes wondered what his ex-classmates in Austria would say if they knew. For Kaworu knew that he was likely making more by himself than all of them combined.

Still, it didn't go to his head. Money was money and he needed it to live, but it's not as if he suddenly felt the need to start spending big. For one, he made ends meet just fine so far in his life from far less, so he knew what he was doing (or at least liked to think so). For another, he still remembered Yui's words that if someone takes notice of the cash flow into his account, he is to point them in her direction; so far that didn't happen, but the possibility was there.

That's why he and Rei decided to acquire some spending money from... elsewhere. Though he had money to burn, it would've likely drawn attention if he actually spent it beyond his necessities. Hard cash, on the other hand, had no electronic trail directly pointing at him (and if the load shark got caught procuring the amount, that was the guy's problem, not Kaworu's).

Speaking of which, he was expecting word from Rei soon in that regard. School being canceled due to the weather was an unexpected boon for handling business outside school, there was no denying it. He was still somewhat uneasy at the idea and what the others will say, but the point of no return was steadily approaching.

For now, he got up and grabbed his coat from the hanger in his room. Asuka and her father both thought it was weird that he didn't just hang it at the entrance like everyone does, but it was force of habit from the old days: if he didn't put it somewhere he could see it, he'd spend several minutes looking for it the next time he needed it until recalling where he put it.

That was one side effect of living in a single-room "home" for his entire youth, he supposed.

Passing into the living room, he heard Asuka's voice from his right as she glanced away from the TV screen and at him. - "You going somewhere?"

"Store."

"I'm coming too." – she replied and nimbly got onto her feet.

"Why?"

"Because I'm boring my ass off cooped up in here." – Asuka grumbled, heading off to her room - no doubt to get warmer clothes on. – "Could use some fresh air."

"Oh. Okay."
"What, did you think I was trying that to score points with you or something?"

"You wouldn't do that."

"...being right on that aside, you'd be surprised."

---

_Ten minutes later_

"You really need to get another coat." – Asuka grumbled at his side as they passed by another chest-height pile of snow, evidently shoveled off the sidewalk by someone. It wasn't snowing at the moment, but the sky above them was still just a homogeneous, formless mass of grey, ready to let go another torrential downpour at the slightest provocation. Though from the chill in the air, Kaworu figured they might be getting some relief in that regard.

"Why?"

"Because this one is ugly as hell! I'm surprised it's not moldy too."

"It's fine."

To be fair, it was rather old. There were already several noticeable cracks in the synthetic leather surface when it came into Kaworu's possession, which was likely why its previous owner threw it out. In the five years since, the number of cracks increased and the leather flaked off to the point where more of the surface was without the original material than with.

Still, the fuzzy interior lining was decently warm enough for the winter, so it was all good as far as Kaworu was concerned.

"No, it's not! Seriously, what do you think people think about you if you keep looking like that?!"

"I don't mind."

"Well, I do!" – Asuka kept pressing. – "If you're gonna hang around me, at least do me the favor of actually caring about your fucking appearance!"

Kaworu rolled his eyes. – "What do you mean, hang around you? You're the one who wanted to come along!"

"That's not the point!"

"It is when you're the one making a big deal about it!" – He sighed. – "If complaining is all you came to do, you should just turn around and go home."

"You wish."

He decided not to rise to the provocation. After their talk back when she was hungover, her jabs became ever so slightly less malicious and confrontative – but Asuka was still Asuka and Kaworu didn't really expect her to give him any more leeway. Why would she?

"So... what have you and your girlfriend been up to?"

_That_, however, was too much even for him. Kaworu wasn't exactly a pottymouth and (usually) not very quick to anger either, but there were moments when even he lost his cool. – "_Verdammt noch mal! _How many times do I have to tell you that she's NOT my girlfriend?! Are you fucking with me?!!"
"Yes, but that's not the point."

He stopped right in his tracks. A second later, he heard Asuka loudly snicker behind him.

"...this isn't funny." – he grumbled as he resumed walking.

"Took... heh... took you long enough to figure it out." – the blonde sniped at him with a devious grin
Mari, if she would've been here, would've helpfully identified as a 'trollface'. – "Who's the idiot
here?"

"Still not funny."

"It is and it's called schadenfreude. Now come on, spill."

Kaworu glanced aside at her in surprise. – "...that's a pretty good pronunciation." – And it actually
was, without any hint of an Anglosphere accent.

"Mom was half-German and I read up on it a bit myself, but I can't chat in German or anything. And
stop changing the subject."

"No, you stop returning to this subject."

"I'll talk about whatever damn subject I want!"

"And I won't talk about whatever damn subject I don't want to!"

Asuka opened her mouth to retort, but paused before finally grumbling – "...walked right into that
one. But still, I meant it when I said you should get a better coat." – she continued in a calm tone. –
"That you keep saying that you don't care if you aren't getting attention from girls is one thing, but
some people simply won't take you seriously if you show up dressed like a hobo."

"I never had problems with that."

"Doesn't mean you never will. Better to have the credibility and not need it than need it and not have
it."

Kaworu couldn't argue with that logic. So he just shrugged and kept walking, his ears not missing
Asuka's mildly annoyed sigh at his apparent indifference.

Yep. That was just like her.

They kept treading the snowy pavement, Kaworu occasionally glancing skyward to see if it looked
like it was going to start snowing again anyway, before he spoke up. – "You know..."

"What?"

"I'm kinda surprised you adjusted to being on Earth so quickly. I mean, aren't the colonies all
unbreathable outdoors?

"They are, but they do go outside where the climate allows it. Helps keeps the kids from growing up
agoraphobic, from what I hear."

"Ago- what?"

"Fear of outdoors. You spend your whole life with a roof above your head, then get chucked outside
with nothing but the sky above you? I once saw some little kids who were so scared they couldn't
step out the airlock for several minutes." – Asuka explained.

In fact, Kaworu noticed that asking her to 'share the wisdom', so to speak, was the easiest way to have a level conversation with the girl. Maybe it was the distraction, maybe it was a childish feeling of 'I know something you don't'; whatever it was, it made her much more tolerable to be around.

"It didn't happen to you, though."

"Dad made sure I was used to being outside. And it's different for every colony. On Polygonus, the buildings look like just like these—she gestured at the street around them—"except you can't open the windows and every door is airtight and has an airlock behind it. What you consider street clothes over here are OK there too; you just need a breathing mask and an oxygen tank. In fact, school backpacks sold over there come with a built-in tank. Dad said the whole thing's not unlike wearing a pre-Impact gas mask with a hose."

"That... doesn't sound too bad, actually."

"It isn't. Except for the dust storms."

"...there they are..."

If Kaworu would've been Rei, he would've felt the attention the two hooded figures were directing at him from the other side of the intersection he and Asuka just walked past.

"I wouldn't believe it if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes." – One whispered, eyes fixed on the two pilots. – "So... I guess that Angel really was telling the truth."

"Can we go now?" – the other figure behind her asked with a flat tone, leaning against the wall behind him with arms folded over his chest.

"Don't you even care?"

"No."

If his blunt answer phased his companion, she didn't show it. – "You heard that the Angel said. What we have to do."

"Not him." – The second figure finally looked up, the edge of his hood rising just high enough to take in Kaworu's receding form. – "He doesn't deserve it."

"You know it doesn't work that way."

"I don't need him. Did you forget?"

"And Yurie?"

Silence.

"What do you think she would say if she heard you say that?" – she pressed. – "What would she think about you? Don't say that you don't care because I know you do. She's the only one who ever meant anything to you."

"It would still be better for her. Anything would be better. Anyone but him. And not just her." – He pointed at Asuka. – "She wouldn't go through all that crap if he's out of the picture either. Fuck it, everyone would be better off without him!"
"You wouldn't. And neither would Yurie."

He immediately unfolded his arms and slammed his fists into the wall behind him hard enough to crack the plaster. – "The fuck you keep bringing her up for?!"

"Because you're throwing a tantrum over him again." – she replied calmly, evidently used to such outbursts. – "If you don't like him, don't think about him. No point in torturing yourself."

He growled but didn't offer a retort. – "...let's go. Just... go." – Without waiting for an answer, he pushed himself away from the wall and walked away, the other figure soon following him. Both treaded the snow with a measure of awkward unsteadiness, as if not used to it.

They walked in silence for several minutes until the girl spoke again. – "...besides, have you seen them? It's like he's not even the same person."

"Which is why it should be done now. Before he turns into... that."

If she wouldn't have been wearing a hood, one would've seen the girl roll her eyes. – "Cut that out already! You can't do anything about it anyway!"

"Because the Angel says so?"

"Because mom explained this to me a few years back and I read up on it afterwards. What the Angel said is correct and it's called a Novikov law or something like that; I don't remember exactly."

She froze mid-step, dawning realization spreading across her features.

"...oh, that's genius."

"What?"

She gestured around them. – "*This is why she told me in the first place!*"

It took her companion a few moments until he connected the dots. – "...she knew?"

"She must've suspected. I mean, why else would you give a twelve year old a crash course in paradoxes?"

"How would I know?" – he grumbled with a shrug.

"She trained you, didn't she?"

"Doesn't mean I know what she's thinking." – He fell quiet for a few moments. – "If she knows stuff like that, you'd think she would've become a scientist or kept fighting the USL. Instead, she goes into being a schoolteacher."

"She always had a soft spot for children." – the girl replied with a smile. – "Until she had me, she thought she couldn't have any herself. You know the whole thing with my aunt, right?"

"Yeah."

"She took her in because of that too. And she didn't quit. She just became a reservist."

"Same thing. She retired."

"It's not the same. If something comes up, she'll reactivate and go out to protect me, auntie and dad."
He remained silent.

"...Takeshi."

"What?"

"Is it... okay for me to talk about this?" – she asked, slightly fidgeting with unease. – "I know we're cousins, but still... it feels so unfair that I've been born to such a good family while you... well..."

"You can't do anything about it."

He looked up at the sky, hood sliding back from the winter breeze to reveal a tangled and dirty mop of blond as his companion raised a hand to hold onto her own hood. Yet his eyes saw not the sky, but an entirely different image: of a form silently huddled on the floor in near-darkness, a nightmarish scar running diagonally from shoulder to waist, empty bottles yawning silently next to a limp and unmoving hand that occasionally twitched.

Of uncaring ignorance that couldn't see beyond its own misery.

And with that image came anger, a searing inferno of fury bottled beneath the surface, raging to be unleashed upon a world that refused to accept him. Years of resentment and hate, roaring to be set loose, no longer content with only tearing him up from the inside.

"I have half a mind not to go back... to just stay here. Maybe with a false name or something."

"You know you can't."

"What else can I do? I don't want to go back to... to... that."

"But if you stay-"

"I know."

"That's why I said 'half a mind'. I'm not an idiot."

With that, he pulled his hood back up and started walking with purpose, his companion hurrying to keep pace with him.

"We don't have much time left. Are you sure you're going to be alright?" – she asked.

"Yeah."

"How do you know?"

"What the Angel said. I'm supposed to succeed, right?"

"Yeah... but it said nothing about what happens afterwards."

"I'll get it done."

"Are you sure I shouldn't go?"

"You'd just get in my way. I don't need help."

---

Chapter completed on 18/05/11. Long delay due to events I won't bore the audience with; the folks at SV get enough of that bellyaching already. The dialogue in this chapter was actually already complete for months, though I was having more than a little trouble writing the latter half of this chapter, trying to strike a balance between boring and giving away too much.
The Novikov self-consistency principle was originally proposed between the late seventies and early eighties as a potential solution to the causality problems introduced by the possibility of time travel; specifically, the possibility to alter the past in such a way that it results in a causal loop of past and future mutually contradicting each other, i.e. a paradox. Igor Dmitriyevich Novikov's proposal was that this is inherently impossible: if an event can cause a paradox, the probability of said event actually happening is zero. Whatever the time traveler tries to do in the past always ends up causing the exact same future, period. The theory is not widely accepted, however, as it assumes the existence of only one timeline and no alternate timelines, which brings it into conflict with, among others, the universal wavefunction theory of quantum physics – AKA the theory that an infinite number of parallel universes exist, with literally everything that could ever happen having happened in at least one of them, with the different outcomes being the timeline divergence points.

It has been theorized that the self-consistency principle could theoretically be used to obtain the correct result of any arbitrarily complex calculation by building a mechanism that receives an approximate result on its input, calculates a better approximate, then sends its output back in time to its own input as the "original" approximate it started out with. As soon as the mechanism is activated, its output would immediately produce the exact, correct result, as long as there is one value the series of approximates can converge upon. This concept was explored in a certain high-profile fanfic in the Harry Potter fandom a few years ago.
"Hey, doc." – Shephard quipped as he slowed down next to Yui, having hurried down the corridor to catch up to her and Maya.

Yui nodded in his direction. – "Colonel. Continue."

"The latest system check on Unit-02 is complete." – Maya replied, glancing down at the tablet in her hand.

"Excellent. Did the Beta team submit their status report?"

"Yes, ma'am. Projections indicate they will start installing the cybernetic components next week."

"I see. If they can follow that schedule, we should be able to perform the Quickening before the end of the month."

The younger woman looked up in surprise. – "That soon?"

"We had three live Quickenings already, along with several simulations ran on Lilith while Unit-02 was under construction." – Yui replied with a dismissive gesture. – "I think the crew should have enough experience at this point to have no trouble with the accelerated timetable."

"Won't it make it harder for the AI to adapt to additional synaptic connections if they're installed afterwards?"

"We can't rule that out, true. But if it's not a problem, we should be able to cut down preparation time even further. This will be an excellent opportunity to verify that."

"I understand. Can I return to my station?"

"Of course. Dismissed."

"Ma'am." – Maya nodded before falling behind, leaving her superior alone with Shephard.

"So... what did you mean by 'quickening'?" – the man asked after a few seconds.

"Synthetic consciousness installation for an Evangelion. A pre-made AI template is encoded into bioelectric impulses and uploaded into the Evangelion's organic core to function as its controlling intelligence." – Yui explained as she walked. – "The process is mostly automated, although it's an extremely complex sequence with a checklist of literally thousands of sub-operations."

"Sounds difficult."

"It took us years to map the neuronal structure of an Evangelion core and even more to determine how to transmit signals into it. Once we had that, the next step was figuring out what to transmit." – She paused for a moment before continuing. – "Frankly, the entire project's success hinged on that one factor, even more so than the development of the DNA itself."

"But you figured it out in the end."
"We did. And as contrived as it sounds, it was thanks to your wife."

Shephard's eyebrows immediately halved their distance to his hairline. –"What does she have to do with it?"

"Her research on wetware emulation theory was exactly what we needed. In essence, think of it like this. What separates intelligent life, even AIs, from inanimate matter?"

"A mind?"

"Partially, yes. Aside from conscious thought, an intelligent being also has a large number of subconscious processes responsible for sending, receiving and coordinating the nerve impulses between the brain and the rest of the body, as well as chemical receptors for the various hormones produced by the rest of the body that in turn trigger more nerve impulses in the brain. Most of the brain is not even involved in conscious thought or the senses that give the consciousness information about its surroundings it can act upon. And yet, without these low-level processes, a body as complex as that of a human or an Evangelion would not be able to operate well enough to allow conscious thought in the first place, unless the conscious thought is capable of micromanaging literally thousands of things at once."

Shephard sighed. – "Doc... you know I'm not a scientist. Just skip to the point."

"I'm getting there, colonel. While the low-level processes are required for day-to-day maintenance, so to speak, the high-level process known as a consciousness is responsible for directing the actions of the body as a whole towards survival. Neither is able to exist without the other and both are vital for the body itself. Thus, it would not be entirely incorrect to consider the union of conscious and subconscious analogous to what people might call a soul. The 'ghost in the machine', so to speak." – She slowed in her step. – "The theory that your wife developed is that a biological mind and an AI running on a neural network architecture are fundamentally interchangeable due to the fact that both are fundamentally the same phenomenon: electrical impulses between base-level components in a highly complex network of identical sub-units. Thus, it should be theoretically possible for an AI to occupy a biological substrate instead of an artificial one, in essence becoming an artificial substitute for a soul."

She turned to him.

"This is the key that allows an Evangelion to operate. Without it, we would be forced to resort to more... radical means."

"Such as?"

"Contact experiment." – Shephard could've sworn he saw the woman lightly shudder at the words. – "Full destructive brain scan. We only studied it in simulations but based on the data we have, the technology we currently have available would very likely leave the subject brain-dead and produce a copy that might not even be sentient, let alone intelligent enough to follow orders. The human brain is simply too fast and too complex to establish a complete snapshot before any of the neurons' action potential changes."

"And if an Evangelion doesn't have a... soul or something, it won't work?"

"Without a soul, an Evangelion is only alive as much as a decapitated body hooked up to life support can be called alive."

With that, she resumed walking, Shephard hurrying to catch up to her. He faintly remembered
Kyoko once having mentioned working on something involving AIs, but it was a long time ago.

"...aaanyway, saw a lot of movement on the road this week. Gehirn people?"

"Indeed." – Yui replied with a nod, looking back down at her tablet. – "The latest shipment included one suit of A-type and F-type equipment each. I'm hoping to start flight tests with the former next week. I presume you have no problem with your daughter getting the honor?"

Shephard shrugged. – "None, but why her?"

"According to her records, she's familiar with high-mobility battleframe combat. I had her perform a few mobility tests with storm rollers, but there's only so much maneuvering we can do indoors."

"Why don't you send her upstairs, then? Plenty of room there."

"We can't exactly maintain operational secrecy if we have Evangelions exercising in plain sight of the city."

"What about inside the Geofront?"

"There's no proving ground set up for them, so any mobility test would cause terrain damage we would have to fix."

"Why not build one, then?"

"Time and money, colonel. Not to mention the amount of materials needed to be shipped into the Geofront would attract undue attention."

"Doc, no offense but I think you're overdoing this secrecy." – Shephard remarked with a roll of his eyes. – "I mean, I get it that you wanted to surprise the military, but the top staff already knows. The civvies wouldn't care and there's no way in hell insurgents could steal or copy this. Sabotage, maybe. But it's a helluva long way away from their territory, so any attack on this facility would be a suicide mission. Who are you really hiding all this from?"

"Rival companies who could copy the Evangelions and undercut us."

"You really think they'd be able to do that? I mean, it took you guys years to get here. The one bunch who could do it themselves are already pitching in with all this crap-

"Language, colonel."

"-and anyone else wouldn't be able to get it done until after you guys are already in business. You've got enough of a head start to not have to worry about getting overtaken, doc. Anyway... what about the F-type? Are you going to test that too?"

"Not right now. Basic functionality can be tested even in our current facilities, but of course we lack the shooting range for a full weapons test." – she pointed out.

The man nodded. – "That, I can understand. I mean, letting loose with the big guns underground is not a good idea unless you plan on bringing the roof down on our heads."

"If you mean the superheavy mass drivers, according to the documentation they have a variable yield."

"Then if we're in need of actually using it before the expo, let's hope it won't explode when it fires."
"I believe we share that sentiment, colonel. That reminds me, have you told your charges about the sync test this afternoon?"

Shephard halted in his step. Then ever so slowly, a sheepish expression appeared on his face before it briefly wilted under Yui's frown.

Asuka felt her phone slightly vibrate in her pocket, asking for her attention. Glancing towards the teacher to ensure his attention was elsewhere, she plucked the device out of her pocket and glanced at the screen to see a message from her father.

**CALL IF NOT IN CLASS**

Well, she was. So she just put it down on her desk before pausing and stuffing it back into her pocket instead. After all, if he suddenly texted her again due to having forgotten something (which has happened before), leaving it on the desk would cause quite the distinctive racket, shortly followed by Hikari's glare and the teacher's admonishment for not having turned it off for class.

With that sorted out, Asuka returned her attention to her school-issue tablet and after double-checking the teacher wasn't looking her way, she resumed playback of a video file that bore the header of *2040 Junior Battleframe League Semi-Finals*. On the screen, a pair of Mk-III/A Durandal battleframes played a not-quite-deadly game of hide-and-seek in a labyrinth of obstacles taller than both machines combined. Even as she watched, one in a green/gray camouflage paintjob with white trimming shot around a corner, immediately spun around 180° and continued in reverse before raising its rifle skyward towards the edge of the roof it was passing by, ready to fire. The moment it reversed into the next intersection, the torso suddenly snapped to the left and opened fire at the red blur that zipped from one roof to the next but hit only empty air.

It spun around again and charged down the path to its left, weapon sweeping the edge of the roof its quarry just passed before turning around and covering its rear against a probable flanking attempt. Then it turned around again and was about to pass into the next interception on its way to maneuver around its quarry to catch it from behind when its shadow reached past the corner it was approaching and said corner suddenly exploded from the shot passing through it, nicking the battleframe in the shoulder and peppering its windshield with a grapeshot of concrete chunks. The force of the hit shoved it shoulder-first into the opposing wall, but the pilot didn't miss a beat and blind-fired a full-auto burst at the corner to buy the second he needed to recover. Instead of giving chase, however, he immediately fired his battleframe's assault harpoons onto the roof that separated them and rapped up to gain a vantage point - only to find out the hard way its quarry having beaten him there by way of said quarry shoulder-charging straight into him so fast that the force of the impact smacked him right back down onto the ground below and onto his back.

Silhouetted against the sun, the red battleframe took aim with its rifle at its downed opponent – but the other beat it to the punch and fired first, an explosion of shrapnel and hydraulic fluid erupting from the red one's left arm before it rapidly reversed and back away from the edge of the roof rather than press the attack with only one arm operational.

Pushing itself off the ground, the camo-pattern battleframe doubled back a short distance before scaling the roof again, out of the field of vision of its opponent's previous position. It found itself alone at the top, though; as it took a closer look, though, it noticed the faint cloud of dust rising from where the other battleframe jumped off and onto the ground and immediately took off in that direction, the pilot noting how more dust kept rising down the alley as his opponent's storm rollers kept kicking it up. The cloud drew near another intersection just as he neared the roof; without wasting a single second, the battleframe leapt right over the edge of the roof and opened fire in mid-
The moment its feet touched the soil, however, the pilot realized there was too little red in the dust and it was too low as well... a moment before his weapon arm was all but severed by close-range fire from behind. The battleframe whirled around just in time to catch a faceful of rifle-thrown-in-his-direction which, although only a momentary distraction, did that job well enough that by the time its other hand drew the machete stored on the back of its waist in anticipation of melee combat now that both combatants were unarmored as far as ranged weapons went, the red battleframe was already on him, its own machete striking down to tear away what was left of its opponent's arm.

Not to be outdone, the camo-pattern battleframe struck back in a horizontal slash that gouged a deep gash across the red one's torso and out the other side – only for the red one to throw its half-functional left arm over its opponent's now-extended weapon arm and hold it down between itself and the torso, while in the same motion the right arm stabbed the machete right through the trapped arm's upper half, the tip banging against the side of the triple-reinforced windshield. Both combatants froze for a moment, then the red battleframe wiggled its machete to tap against its opponent's exposed windshield twice before letting go.

Asuka smirked to herself as the video ended after the camo-pattern battleframe flashed its front searchlights three times in a signal for surrender. Kicking up the dust and ripping off her left arm's armor plate to use as a decoy before doubling back slowly so as to not raise any more dust and catching him from behind when he reflexively shot at the decoy was one of her smarter moments. Passing up two chances to flank him when he was expecting it in favor of meeting him head-on by first shooting through the wall when she saw his shadow around the corner, then by beating him to the same high ground he was going for, only to follow up with a flanking once he started expecting her to be aggressive and wasn't expecting her to set up an ambush managed to catch him off-guard well enough to give her a clear shot at his back, which was all good; if she would've tried standing her ground, he would've wised up to it by the third time and shot first. He always shot first if they saw each other at the same time, which is why Asuka learned to not see each other at the same time: as good as she was, his reaction time and twitch aim was just faster than hers, so she played dirty to level the playing field. Even so, she was lucky she wasn't cockpitted by his final blow; she would've lost immediately as per the non-lethal rules of the tournament that used triple-reinforced cockpits and rifles of too low caliber to damage said cockpit in order to avoid fatalities, especially in the junior league.

It was too bad that year's tournament rolled the two of them into groups that made them face off with each other in the semi-finals; in every other year, they only ever met in the finals. In fact, the rivalry between the Red Baron and the Green Knight was something of a legend: as soon as they both got into the tournament and spent enough time in the duels to learn the ropes, they pretty much monopolized the tournament finals between the two of them to the point where none of the other contestants had any chance to reach beyond 3rd place because the two of them were always finalists, though who won and who lost was currently tied between them. That's not to say the others weren't good; some of them did give Asuka a run for her money and the Green Knight actually lost an elimination match against someone else once (followed by Asuka steamrolling over his defeater but her victory tasting rather sour to her afterwards due to not having gotten the fight she was hoping for), but the two of them were in a whole another league. They were, to put it simply, naturals. Not that it stopped rumors that the tournament ladder was rigged in their favor by the organizers.

Asuka didn't know his identity, as par for the course for the junior tournament's policy of allowing contestants to participate under aliases if they wish, but she hoped to change that someday, if only to walk up to the guy and give him a firm and honest handshake as the one and only worthy opponent she respected. Which was why she reviewed the archived official records of their duels every now and then: less to watch herself and more to watch him in order to learn some tricks and pick holes in
his strategy she could exploit later.

Checking the time, Asuka noted it was five minutes until end of class, so she put the tablet aside and paid attention to the class’ subject matter for once. As much as school sucked, she recognized its necessity to get where she wanted to be in life. After all, no one would justifiably trust someone without even basic education with an extremely expensive war machine.

Well, with the possible exception of Yui Ikari, if her giving an Evangelion to a random street urchin was of any indication.

For what it’s worth, Kaworu was still alive despite his background and was anything but suicidally hotheaded, she gave him that. On the other hand, she still hadn't seen him in actual combat and decided to withhold judgment over him until then. And as for a general opinion... Asuka found herself conflicted. His complete and utter lack of interest in her was somewhat refreshing in a way; she has had more than enough unwanted suitors in the past already, attractive as she was. Yet at the same time, it was almost... insulting. Asuka didn't consider herself a narcissist, yet being actively ignored just didn't sit right with her. Maybe it was the attention she always got from everyone else, but she certainly wasn't about to start chasing him or something.

Ten minutes later, as Kaworu was leaning back in his chair to stretch his legs while listening to Toji and Kensuke chattering behind him in Japanese (he noticed quite a few students preferring to use the language between each other; it wasn't anything unusual, considering Kaworu himself did the same with German in his previous school), he perked up when Asuka suddenly appeared next to him, dropped a note into his lap, then left without a word. Puzzled, he picked up the scrap of paper and saw broken German in her handwriting on it:

PAPA HAT ANGERUFEN, TEST BEI 1700

Kaworu rolled his eyes. 'You could've just said so after school...' he grumbled before crumpling the note and stuffing it into his desk - unaware of Kensuke's eyes following his hand.

As indicated in this chapter, a major deviation from canon is the fact that in this story, humanity has no understanding of metaphysical biology whatsoever, which also means lacking the theoretical foundations for understanding the nature of the AT-field, hence their mistaking the Angels' AT-fields for a mere energy shield when in truth, an AT-field is about as comparable to an energy shield as an energy shield is comparable to a neolithic-era wooden shield. The introduction of Combine computational technology provided access to enough raw processing power to make AI research take a giant leap forward; from there, the AEL used Kyoko's research to figure out how to use an AI as a soul substitute for an Evangelion, thereby rendering contact experiments obsolete. On the other hand, the artificial nature of a synthetic consciousness means it lacks the metaphysical component required for projecting an AT-field, thereby rendering these Evangelions incapable of projecting AT-fields as-is.

Compared to the canon Evas, these ones are more stable and safer, but the lack of an AT-field means the average SCEverse Eva would get gutted by any single one of the canon Angels one-on-one unless it's a high-end pilot like Rei, in which case it will be a stalemate until the Eva runs out of power. On the other side of the coin, the canon Evas would smear a low-end SCEverse Angel across the terrain but would go down very quickly against a high-end one like Zeruel, as it will be demonstrated shortly (as in, within a few chapters). Increased intelligence and sentience is a double-edged sword: it allows this universe's Angels to use their powers more intelligently, but it
also makes them no longer stupid enough to not respond to intimidation and psychological warfare.
"You know you could've just told me in person after class, right?"

"Are you stupid? If I suddenly call you outside, everyone will know something's up."

Kaworu rolled his eyes. – "And dropping a note in my lap with a message in German isn't suspicious at all. Okay."

"Why, did anyone notice?"

"Aida did." – Rei spoke up from behind the two.

Both Kaworu and Asuka turned to look at her. – "How do you know?" – Asuka demanded.

"He read the note after class was out and is now following us."

Kaworu decided not to ask her how did she know that. Chances were, it wasn't by means meant for Asuka's ears; Rei stressed it to him repeatedly that whatever... special things the two of them had, no one must know. He had no idea why she was so insistent about it; if anything, she seemed almost afraid of being found out as anything but a completely normal human.

"He could be living in this direction." – Asuka pointed out.

"We are not between the school and his place of residence. Suzuhara's residence is also not in this direction. Therefore, he has no reason to be here."

"How do you even know where those two idiots live? Did Nagisa take you to their places once or something?"

"I've never been to their places myself, so no." – Kaworu interjected.

Asuka looked behind them briefly, seemingly ignorant that doing so is the fastest way to alert someone tailing her that she's aware of having company other than the two she was walking with. – "I don't see him. Are you sure he's following us?"

Or maybe she just didn't care.

"He is falling behind by one block to avoid detection."

"What do we do, then? Go in circles until we lose him?" – Kaworu asked.

"Hell no. I ain't gonna be late because of that idiot." – Asuka grumbled.

"He'll see us go into the personnel elevator." – he pointed out.

"I don't care."

"But-"
"Look. We were told to keep our employment discreet, right?"

"Yeah."

"Which means not telling anyone. He sees us going inside, how's that our problem?"

"He's doing that because of you doing something suspicious."

"How ELSE was I supposed to tell you there's a test, huh?"

"After classes, maybe?"

"Look, I gave you that damn note to make sure you know ahead of time and don't plan on running off with your idiots for the afternoon, only to have to tell them at the last minute that something came up! 'Something came up' just begs the question 'what came up'. Do you really need it spelled out for you?"

"What the hell is your problem all of a sudden?"

"I'm allergic to stupidity, that's what!"

Behind them, Rei let out an inaudibly quiet sigh.

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**Geofront, AEL Headquarters**

**1647 hours**

By the time they reached the Geofront facilities, however, the upcoming event appeared to be more than just a routine test, if one of the staff directing them to a conference room instead of the locker room was of any indication. And as soon as Shephard crossed the threshold of the room a few minutes after them, Kaworu immediately noticed the man was tense.

"Change of plans, kids. Test's cancelled because we have a live target, but the son of a bitch couldn't possibly be any more off the beaten path if it tried."

"Where?" – Asuka demanded, tone turning serious and no-nonsense so swiftly Kaworu looked at her in surprise. It was nothing like her previous bitchiness. Not even close.

"Western Siberia, couple dozen klicks west of the Yenisei river.‖ – her father replied, activating the conference desk's built-in projector to display a map indicating a location somewhere in northern Asia. – "Weather is awful there at the moment; 100% cloud cover, so we don't have a satellite visual on the target. And if that's not bad enough, weather radar flagged an incoming snowstorm that will get there before you, so visibility's going to be nearly nonexistent."

"And you expect us to walk all the way there?" – the girl asked in a skeptical tone. – "I'm not sure the reactor will last that long."

"It won't, but the navy's lending us some airlift. The Evangelions are getting ready for transport topside, after which they're gonna get strapped onto three frigates and taken up to a suborbital trajectory. Apparently the doc managed to get her hands on some kind of harness that can be attached to the bottom of a frigate to haul an Evangelion; where she got it and so soon after the tactic we improvised for the last battle, I have no idea. But we're gonna use 'em."

"Is it the same tactic as the one used by Unit-00 in the last engagement?‖ – Rei asked.

"No. They're gonna drop you off at low altitude, no orbital drop this time because we're taking full
combat gear. If you have anything to do, food, drink, potty break, anything else, now's the time because you're not coming back out until it's over." – Shephard stressed. – "Again, weather's really bad and it's over sixty below outside, so you can't pop the hatch if you need to take a leak because a plugsuit will not keep you from freezing to death within minutes."

"Why are we even going in there if it's that bad? The previous ones all came to us. Whatever they're after is probably right here." – Asuka guessed.

"We don't even know what they're after and for all we know, this thing could just head off and attack somewhere at random if we don't respond."

"Yes, but look at the terrain and the weather. This could be a trap."

"For what?"

"Luring us out of here so that another one can move in for the kill before we can double back, for one. That's what I'd do."

"I know what you're saying but even if it would come right here, we're in the middle of a major city. Which means collateral damage." – Shephard pointed out. – "Bunkering down might give us the home field advantage, but I don't think the locals will appreciate it if there won't be much of a city left by the end. We have to intercept them in the countryside whenever we can. It's not going to make deployment or retreating easy, but it's either that or leaving a couple hundred thousand people homeless."

"Did the president specify such rules of engagement?" – Rei asked.

Shephard made a dismissive gesture. – "Like hell. Doc says ROE's my call and she agrees with me on this, so we're doing it."

"How about the temperature?" – Kaworu asked. – "Can an Evangelion even stay online in that cold?"

"Doc says it can for as long as you keep the reactor running." – Shephard replied with a shrug. – "Anyway, like I said, we're taking full combat gear. Nagisa, you're going in with B-type equipment, same as before. Asuka, the doc was planning on having you test the A-type equipment next week, but there's no time for that. So you're going in live. You read the manual?"

"Yeah. I'll figure it out."

"Good. As for you..." – The man turned his attention to Rei. – "If the visibility was any better, I'd send you in with G-type equipment for fire support, but it's useless here and the F-type's servos would just get filled with snow and I have no idea if the servos will hold up in the cold. So you're going in with C-type." – He looked back at the others. – "If anybody has equipment problems from the cold, just ditch it and keep going, we can always go back for it later once the weather improves. The doc's not gonna be happy but we're not losing anybody over this, understood? The faster we nail this bastard, the sooner you'll have extraction and the less chance of equipment malfunction. We have to wrap this up and extract before nightfall because if this drags out and your reactors won't have enough juice left to run overnight, you either freeze to death or ditch the Evangelions and the doc will kill you."

"Damned if we do, damned if we don't." – Asuka chimed in with a smirk.

For what it's worth, Shephard did return the smirk but kept his seriousness otherwise. – "I know, but my point still stands."
"What is the expected time frame of our deployment?" – Rei asked.

"You're gonna be crossing four hours' worth of time zones but even with that, you'll only have about two hours until sunset because it'll take time attaching the Evangelions to the ships so that they don't fall off during the acceleration."

"If it takes that much time, how are we going to come back here? They can't reattach us that quickly." – Kaworu reasoned.

"You'll have to grab onto the ships and ride them on the top. They'll have already seen you by that time, so there's no point in hiding anymore. As soon as you're up, the ships are heading south to Novosibirsk, but it's a 1500 kilometer ride and if you run out of power on the way, you're gonna fall off. Doc's gonna send people to the rendezvous point to juice the Evangelions up, then you'll come right back here.”

"I still don't like this." – Asuka grumbled.

"Well, we're not paid to like it. Don't be getting cold feet on me now. No pun intended."

"I am not getting cold feet." – she fired back. – "But like I said, this is exactly what I'd do if I was in their place."

"Asuka, we don't even know if they're smart enough for tactics like that."

"How do we know they aren't?"

1819 hours

At an improvised airstrip near the city, a Navy officer with the four-star insignia of a Commander pulled the overcoat on top of his EVA suit tighter around himself. – "Когда мы стали частным грузовым транспортом армии?" – he grumbled in heavy accented Russian.

"Они всегда зависели от нас за их тяжелый подъем." – the similarly uniformed man standing next to him answered.

"Я знаю, но это смешно! Мы фрегат, а не проклятый запас корабль. Можем ли мы даже взлететь с этой вещью, свисающей с нас?"

"Мне говорят, что мы можем. Во всяком случае, что это?"

"Что-то классифицировано. Даже я не знаю." – The captain shivered. – "Черт возьми, здесь холодно... Как долго до завершения погрузки, лейтенант?"

"Около получаса, сэр."

"Хорошо. Сообщите мне, когда это будет сделано."  

Despite 48 years of life behind him, Kouji Takao didn't think he had ever gone through a winter as cold as this. Then again, he did spend the last few of Earth's winters in space, so he easily could've missed one or several. Then there was the fact that a sizable portion of the ones he did experience, he did so in a poorly heated apartment in Sapporo during the Occupation, which went a long way towards desensitizing him to winters during his formative years.

At least walking back inside the mercifully air-conditioned ship he spent the last few years commanding spared him from being exposed to it any longer. For now, at least. People might want
to say it's also cold in space, but those people obviously never looked into the fact that the reason why the civilian spacecraft of the pre-Impact era often had a chrome shine to them was because the entire hull functioned as a massive radiative heatsink to keep the instrumentation from cooking the astronauts alive with waste heat, to say nothing of the additional heat influx from solar exposure and the astronauts themselves getting warmed over from wriggling around in the cramped space of their capsules.

While an Ezekiel-class frigate was quite a bit bigger at 96 meters, it was of course packing a nuclear fusion reactor crammed into the aft section, to say nothing of the fusion rocket engines and, to a lesser extent, the spinal coilgun when it was firing. Takao himself had seen plenty of times the effectiveness of infrared sensors during war games and still remembered the endurance training of preparing the crew for working with the reactor off for an extended period, which more often than not meant until every visible surface had condensation frosted over it, so he knew exactly how much of a double-edged sword heat was in space. Still, that didn't mean he didn't enjoy the simple creature comfort of walking through the decently warm corridors back to the bridge, nodding at the crew's salutes as he passed by them. He saw no point in ditching his EVA suit just yet; if anything came up and he had to go outside again, it would be a waste of time to have to put it on again and he did not want to go outside in his regular uniform.

Or go outside at all, for that matter.

It was until he was back in his seat in the CIC that he leaned back and idly gazed at the whiteness beyond the forward viewscreen as he reflected on recent events. He of course heard about the giant alien creature attacking Tokyo-2 in September. Although it wasn't exactly the most believable story, it was impossible to miss the fleetwide announcement of DEFCON 2, so there went the theory of it only having been a rumor. The complete destruction of an entire carrier group with all personnel confirmed KIA two months later was just the proverbial cherry on top, along with the fact that a frigate was supposedly called upon to airlift something massive into orbit, then release it on a reentry trajectory into the city that somehow participated in a counterattack that destroyed the hostile entity.

He didn't know what was going on; in fact, no one he knew on the force did, not even his superiors. All he knew is that he and two other frigates have been abruptly handed orders earlier this day to land near Tokyo-2 to receive cargo they were to deliver posthaste to the middle of nowhere. Suspicious, especially since said 'cargo' turned out to be three extremely large objects so heavy his crew would have to redline the engines to even get off the ground, but orders are orders.

Even so, he had to admit he felt mildly tempted to peek under the tarp just to see what was underneath. Especially since the technical personnel who accompanied the cargo and oversaw its handling were not only civilians, but apparently personnel of something called NERV, which he immediately remembered was a name he heard from the mouth of none other than president Keel himself in his public address shortly after the incident with the carrier group as the name of a private military contractor tasked with handling the situation. Although a quick online search found literally nothing about them aside from news reports of the public address and speculations, he still realized something was up.

The signs where there. Giant aliens attack Tokyo-2 and are repelled by unknown means that included a frigate airlifting something heavy, followed by Keel's address that NERV did it, and now he's suddenly ordered to airlift heavy cargo for NERV, except the destination was far away from everything of value.

He knew there was something big going on here. He just didn't know what.

When his XO finally returned to the CIC to inform him that the cargo is secured and started giving
orders to the operator personnel, Takao remembered the instructions handed to him and grabbed his headset before keying a communication frequency into the controls on his headrest. – "Shalkar Actual, comm check." – Said instructions specified that he was to contact a specific radio frequency before taking off and stand by for additional orders, though they did not specify who those orders would come from.

To his surprise, a response came almost immediately. – "Shalkar Actual, Red Queen. Loud and clear." – The voice was female, almost on the young side, but professional.

"Red Queen, Shalkar Actual. Request identification."

"Negative."

His eyebrows went up at the reply. Whoever it was, she refused out of hand to identify herself beyond her call sign. – "For what reason?"

"Opsec."

Or she was ordered to refuse, it would seem. – "Understood. Request payload status."

"Three units, classified. Awaiting delivery to op area."

And they were given three objects to transport. That was all but confirmation that whatever the cargo was, it was manned. And the last two words sent alarm bells ringing in Takao's head; they weren't ordered to prepare for combat upon delivery, but the person on the other side was treating this as a combat drop. Were they taking something to an exercise they weren't told about? – "Pre-flight checks are in progress. Delivery will commence in ten minutes."

"Shalkar Actual, copy. Request notification prior to arrival at op area."

"Copy that. Any additional mission parameters?"

"Drop at low altitude. After drop, hold position and land, but keep the engines running and stand by for extraction. Red Queen, out."

39 minutes later

"Time's up. You ready to go?"

"All systems online."

"Okay. Let's roll."

"Initializing transdimensional entropic reactor starter sequence."

\[ Geofront, AEL Headquarters \]
\[ Same time \]

"What's our status?" – Yui asked as she walked into the control center.

"They should be arriving right about now." – Shephard replied over his shoulder before turning back to the central display, currently showing a map with six indicators, three blue and three green, with the green ones marked 00, 01 and 02. 
Yui opened her mouth to reply but was interrupted by Hyuga. – "Sir?"

"What is it?"

"It could be nothing, but the gravimetric array that got installed last month just picked up a new contact. It's about a hundred kilometers east of here."

That immediately got Shephard's attention. – "That's right inside Old Tokyo! Where did it come from?"

Hyuga shrugged. – "I don't know, it literally just showed up on the screen."

"Another Angel?"

"MAGI says no correlation with their usual pattern." – Maya reported. – "But if it was anything else, it shouldn't be detectable this deep within the Earth's gravity well."

"Power output stable at 35%. Initializing neural interface."

Around the figure, the walls lit up and before him, the text E-OS v2.01 MK-II/A briefly flashed along with an insignia of a bifurcated lance superimposed on a circle with twelve wings before all was replaced with a seamless external view, leaving him and his seat appear all but suspended in the air for a moment before a body materialized below them.

"Synchronization stable at 51%. Routing power to Aeon drive."

Snow fell away as the armored humanoid rose onto its feet, wings spreading with a rising hum before it rose into the air with a barely visible blue glow from nozzles across its wings, the snow underneath completely melting in a few moments to reveal rapidly blackening concrete.

"Ramscoop intake set to atmospheric mode. Ionic accelerator online, density coefficient set to atmospheric mode. Theater coordinates locked, calculating intercept trajectory now... Trajectory set. Projected arrival in 23 minutes. Standing by for acceleration."

"Punch it."

"Ma'am, the military issued an air traffic warning." – Aoba reported, looking up at Shephard and Yui. – "They picked up an unknown flying object above Kanto, headed west-northwest at high speed in the upper troposphere. Same location as the gravimetric signature."

"On display."

The map zoomed out to show the rest of Asia and yellow marker appeared over Japan, marked UNKN. Shephard was about to ask for further details when he realized something was off about that marker, albeit it took him a few more seconds to realize what.

On a map spanning thousands of kilometers, he could see the marker move.

"...how fast is that thing moving?"

Aoba turned back to his terminal. – "Checki- oh what the fuck." – he swore.

"Language, mister Aoba."
"Excuse me, ma'am. The target is moving at Mach 6.2."

Shephard's eyes all but bugged out. – "Say what?!"

"It's still accelerating. Now at Mach 6.4. Target has reached stratospheric altitude."

"No way that's not an Angel."

"But the gravimetric pattern-

"Unless someone managed to get their hands on an old SR-71 and doubled its speed just for the sake of buzzing us with it, that's definitely not one of ours!" – Shephard declared.

"Target is now at Mach 6.8!"

"In the stratosphere?" – Hyuga asked in a startled tone, looking up from his terminal himself. – "How the devil is it not burning to a crisp that low?!"

"Better yet, where the hell is it going?" – Shephard demanded. – "It flew right by us, so it's not coming here."

"I can't tell without knowing how long it's going to keep accelerating like that." – Aoba replied. – "Current trajectory puts it over China, but it keeps moving further ahead."

"Then just draw a damn line on the map!"

After a short while, a line shot out from the yellow marker... and directly intersected the blue and green markers halfway across the continent.

"...it's going for the kids."

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Western Siberia, Yenisei Estuary
1458 hours, local time

Snow flew up into the air as three massive pairs of feet landed in the meter-deep snow, the Evangelions rising to their full height. – "Detachment complete. Shalkar Actual, proceed as planned and stand by for extraction. Red Queen, out." – Asuka called into the radio before looking around.

As expected, it was near-complete whiteout. Even with the panoramic display darkening to compensate for the brightness of the snow, she could barely tell where the sky ended and the ground began, even without the powdery snow whirling around them from the wind and the aftereffects of their own landing.

"Well, they weren't kidding about the cold." – she remarked as she glanced at the external environmental readouts.

"I was hoping they would." – Sekhmet grumbled.

"What, you feeling chilly?"

"No, you brat! Blood is meant to flow hot and free, not run cold and sluggish! This is cold enough to freeze blood solid! It denies me even the most basic pleasures in life."

"You... consider killing a basic pleasure?"
The AI scoffed at that. — "What do you think I was created for, to be a nanny? I'm a weapon that's meant to kill and destroy. Why shouldn't I take pleasure in my work if it's what I'm supposed to do anyway?"

Asuka shook her head. — "I think you need to get a few bolts tightened."

"Very funny."

"I don't suppose anyone here wants to swap rides?"

"No." — Lilith replied immediately. — "Rei-san is and always has been my operator. Although my continued service is not contingent on the status quo, it is preferred."

"How about you, idiot?"

"I have a name, you know. And anyway, is this really the time for this?"

"Target is about 5000 meters in this direction, according to pre-launch data." — Lilith interjected and a waypoint marker appeared on Asuka's HUD. The girl had a feeling the other AI picked the timing deliberately to break up a possible fight before it began. While she was told that part of the purpose of an Evangelion's AI was to monitor the pilot's mental health to ensure they don't go off the deep end while behind the controls of a thousand-ton killer cyborg, Lilith felt unusually... proactive for an AI.

Then again, Asuka herself felt more than a little anxious. Which did not lessen even as they arrived to the waypoint... for a quite simple reason.

"...where is it?"

"This is the epicenter of the gravimetric reaction. It should be right here." — Sekhmet replied as Unit-02 looked around, seeing nothing but white. If anything, the wind was even more intense now, snowflakes whirling around them in a maelstrom no sane person would venture out into.

"Well, it's not! Are your sensors even working?"

"My sensors are picking up the gravimetric distortion as well." — Lilith added. — "It's not equipment malfunction."

"Switch to infrared." — The entry plug around her switched to uniformly dark blue, with only the other Evangelions' outlines being any brighter at light blue. Then again, it's not like an infrared sight would see much in a storm to begin with. — "Anything?"

"No. Either it froze to death already or the blizzard is too heavy to see it from here."

In his own Evangelion's entry plug, Kaworu sighed. — "Well, we're not going home until we find it. Any idea-"

"Contact!" — Asuka snapped, Unit-02 bringing its weapon up into firing position.

"Where?!!"

"I saw something move when I switched back to optical. It's gone now."

All three (or six, depending on whether one counted the Evangelions) kept a watchful eye, Kaworu's gaze slowly sweeping across the whiteness, as if he could discern where their foe lurked. No such
luck, though: his eyes told him nothing other than the snow.

But there was something. Shortly after the frigate carrying him stopped shaking from the resistance of atmospheric reentry, he began to feel it, a pressure in the back of his head. With the attention Rei paid to him in the time since the last Angel, doing whatever she did while poking around inside his mind, his head hurt only slightly this time, but it was there. A scratching presence, as if he was being watched from behind.

And based on how much luck they were having right now, he knew it wasn't through eyes like his.

"There!" – Asuka barked again, Unit-02 flinching in a different direction this time.

Once again, Kaworu had no luck. – "I didn't see anything. Adam?"

"I did." – Adam replied. Kaworu only noticed during the last sync test before New Year's that the AI's vocabulary underwent a sudden change. Well, mostly: he no longer referred to himself in the third person but was still as overly eloquent when asked something.

The teen hadn't asked yet, but he wasn't stupid enough to think this was the time for it, so he mentally filed that away for later.

"As did I, but not at that position." – Lilith added.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw movement in this direction." – A marker appeared on Unit-01's HUD.

Nearly at a right angle to where Unit-02 was pointing its weapon at the moment.

"...that's nowhere near what she saw."

Then Unit-02 suddenly fired off a burst in the direction it was facing. – "The fuck?!"

Needless to say, that got the others' attention. Unit-00 immediately spun around with its assault cannon rising to firing position, Kaworu himself flinching in alarm as he frantically swept the whiteness himself. – "What?!"

"That was definitely on target!" – Asuka declared in an agitated tone.

"Remember, these guys got those territory shield things!"

"Absolute Territory field." – Lilith chimed in with the code name Yui chose for the phenomenon in question. Kaworu didn't quite understand the point behind over-complicating the naming like that and voiced that opinion, only to be reminded by Shephard that the whole situation was still 'kinda hush-hush', so being obscure was a bonus if someone heard the phrase 'AT-field' who wasn't supposed to be in the know. After all, a too self-explaining code name was worse than no code name at all, since it still attracted attention to the fact that there is something someone wished to hide.

"I know but there was nothing like that! It just vanished!"

"You missed."

"I did not fucking miss! The tracer went right through, I saw it! Sekhmet, where the hell is it?!"

"No infrared or radar signature. Snow playing with your eyes?"
"I DID NOT FUCKING HALLUCINATE! It was right fucking there!"

Kaworu was about to retort when the words died on his lips.

Right in front of him, in plain sight, was the Angel.

It looked almost like the first one: no neck, just a three-eyed face on the front of its upper body. But that's where the similarities ended: while the first one had an almost skeletal appearance, this one was, for lack of a better word, skinny. It didn't even have distinct shoulders to show where the torso ended and the arms began; if anything, the top of its silhouette, from three-fingered hand to three-fingered hand, was an almost seamless half-circle. Almost as if someone flipped an anchor upside down and gave it legs.

But that was not the weirdest part. It was an alien, after all, it was bound to look weird.

No, the most unsettling part was that it was not doing anything. Kaworu knew it saw him before he saw it, it had the element of surprise – and didn't take it. Instead, it just stared, right into Unit-01's eyes... and yet, some part of Kaworu felt as if the Angel was staring through the Evangelion's chest, through the entry plug's wall and right into his eyes.

He didn't know for how long did they stare at each other; seconds, maybe. But Adam evidently sent out word because both girls whipped around, weapons trained. – "Wait!" – he reflexively called out.

"What?!" – Asuka fired back. He didn't reply immediately; the seconds stretched out... and nothing happened.

"Why is it just standing there?"

Then right before their eyes, another Angel came out of the haze.

And another.

And another.

And another.

And another.

"...Adam." – Kaworu said slowly. – "Am I hallucinating that there's six Angels that look exactly alike?"

"Negative. Six visual contacts confirmed. No infrared signature or radar signature detected."

"Wait. I've seen this before." – Tabris suddenly interjected.

'Where?'

"I don't remember."

Then all six Angels moved at once and all hell broke loose.

A thundering boom announced Unit-00 firing its assault cannon, spitting a deadly accurate shell at the nearest Angel. Yet the projectile found no target and hit only the ground behind the Angel as it kept charging, without even bothering to defend itself.

"Lilith! Reconfirm visual contacts!" – Rei barked as off to her left, the thrusters on Unit-02's back
came to life and the red Evangelion swiftly boosted away from the others, two Angels turning to follow it.

"Confirmed."

Unit-02 fired its assault rifle at one of its pursuers but all it did was kicking up the snow in their trail. Suddenly stopping, the Evangelion stepped to the side to avoid the lunge of the closer Angel and swung its own leg at its quarry in a kick...

...only to stumble in lost balance as the leg sailed right through the Angel's body with no resistance whatsoever. – "Wha-?!" – Asuka yelped before the other Angel crashed into her Evangelion and sent it to the ground. She immediately snapped her weapon arm up and fired, but once again the tracers went right through it before its clawed hand dug into Unit-02's lower torso.

Asuka grit her teeth. She knew it was going to hurt, but it still caught her unaware how much it hurt. If anything, it definitely put a bad period to shame. Even so, it wasn't bad enough to keep her from rolling to the side as soon as the Angel pulled back for another strike, evading the blow. Yet she barely got one foot under her before the first Angel announced its return to the fray by way of a kick to the face so powerful it literally sent the Evangelion flying. But Asuka wasn't slow on the uptake either and immediately fired up the Evangelion's flight thrusters, halting her ballistic trajectory into a hover...

...only for the Angels to immediately launch into the air after her. – "Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me!"

A short distance away, Kaworu wasn't faring any better. He swung Unit-01's elbow at one of the Angels assailing him but just like with Asuka, it went right through the Angel's face and out its back. Behind him, Unit-00 was weaving left and right while backing away at maximum speed, unloading its chest autocannons at the Angels lunging at it with no sense of self-preservation whatsoever.

"What the hell is going on?! Anything I throw at these things goes through them! They don't dodge, they don't shield, they just walk through it!" – Asuka cried before throwing Unit-02 into a sideways flip to avoid an Angel's attempt to grab the Evangelion's ankle, crashing back down to the ground from lack of control but scrambling back to her feet immediately.

"I noticed!" – Kaworu shot back, leaning out of the way of an incoming swipe. – "It's as if they're not real!"

"Well, their claws feel very much real! Sekhmet, any ideas?!"

"I already told you, brat! If they were a figment of your imagination, I wouldn't see them on cameras, but I do!"

"We all see them!" – Lilith confirmed.

"Then how come they don't show up on infrared or radar?!"

"Wait!" – Rei interjected, eyes narrowing as she stopped evading for a second and took an incoming blow, but the damage was acceptable and the time was enough for her to see what she wanted to see. – "They do not make footprints!"

"How the hell?! They must weight a thousand tons each, how the hell are they not leaving footprints?!" – Kaworu complained.
"Wait a sec! Blueberry, do you have airburst?!" – Asuka demanded.

"I have!"

"Fire at the ground between us!"

Rei didn't react immediately. A claw meant for Unit-00's arm cleaved only air as the Evangelion spun out of the way then bent forward to evade its other assailant's follow-up attack, turning the loss of balance into a forward tumble that ended with the Evangelion rolling up into a sitting position, heels slamming into the ground barely a second before its assault cannon fired again. The recoil from firing without bracing itself knocked Unit-00 flat onto its back, but the Angels leaping at their fallen foe like hungry wolves grasped only snow, as Unit-00 immediately rolled to the side and kicked itself off the ground, twisting itself into a standing position before landing on its feet.

Inside the entry plug, Rei winced with a small gasp from the flare of pain in her hip.

"Careful, you're putting too much stress on my joints!" – Lilith warned.

"I cannot afford not to!"

Outside, her shot detonated off to the side of the Angel Asuka was futilely trying to keep away with suppressive fire. – "Shit, I didn't see it! It's too fucking bright outside!"

"See what?!" – Sekhmet growled impatiently.

"I don't think these guys have shadows either!"

"So?!" – Kaworu asked back before he let out a yelp when Unit-01 suddenly stopped moving and fell onto its back from momentum. Briefly shaking the disorientation away, he was in the middle of opening his mouth when Adam beat him to a punch with an outline of the Evangelion, the storm rollers highlighted in red with the text ACTUATOR FAILURE.

"No heat, no radar, no shadow, no footprint! These things are definitely not physical objects!"

"I concur!" – Rei added. – "Our attacks do not hit because there is nothing to hit!"

Kaworu barely managed to scramble back to his feet before the Angels were on him, this time splitting up to circle around him like sharks sizing up their prey before moving in at the same time and forcing him to jump back. – "What, are these things holograms?!"

"They've got to be!"

"But how can they physically interact with other objects without other objects being able to interact with them?!" – Rei asked.

"I DON'T KNOW! But there must be something that's projecting and controlling them! Sekhmet, can you scan the area?"

"How?! You keep moving around!"

"Triangulate, you idiot! You've got two antennas on your head for a reason!"

"Gravimetric interference is blanketing the entire area! I cannot even detect each other!"

"Search for differences in intensity, then! Lilith, Adam, network together and triangulate! Blue,
Nagisa, scatter and draw these fuckers as far away from each other as possible!"

"Easy for you to say..." – Kaworu muttered under his breath as he gave up trying to get his storm rollers to work again while evading Angel attacks at the same time. They were clogged up with snow, it would seem.

So he did the only thing he still could: he ran.

It was a good thing there was an inexplicable stop in Angel attacks for over a month, as it allowed him to get a bit more up to speed with his piloting in the meantime. He still had to pay full attention to what he was doing, but at least he wasn't stumbling and tripping anymore (for the most part), which was a start. Of course, he was nowhere near Rei's level and even Asuka turned out to be surprisingly quick at figuring things out; in fact, Kaworu had a hunch she had overtaken him already.

That being said, running on soft ground was not something they practiced at the Geofront, the snow was deep enough that a conventional vehicle would've required tank treads to traverse it and it became quite slippery under an Evangelion's weight, so he still had to mind his step.

He was only peripherally aware that the girls were already beyond visual range, leaving him alone with the two Angels on his trail. Speaking of which, the two didn't seem to have much trouble with the snow, striding over it with long steps that seemingly didn't have his problem with traction.

Then again, if Asuka was right, they didn't need traction whatsoever.

"Interference spreading out. Two composite sources confirmed." – Lilith reported.

"That's it! Keep drawing them apart!"

As if on a sign, Unit-01 stepped on a rock under the snow and almost lost its balance, but recovered with only a stumble. 'How long is this going to take, damn it?' Kaworu grumbled internally. 'Tabris, do you have anything for me?'

'I know Harachel is capable of this, but this presence is not his.' the Angel replied. 'It is likely one of his pupils, but I cannot tell who.'

"Third composite source confirmed."

"Guys, do you still have two on you each?!!" – Asuka demanded.

"Yes!" – came Rei's response.

"Me too!" – And that was more than enough, as far as he was concerned. At least the Angels didn't seem to have any kind of ranged weapons, or he would be hosed.

Then again, he thought with exasperation, he likely just jinxed it. Seeing how much luck he had in his battles so far, it wouldn't be out of the question.

"Fourth composite source confirmed."

"Mark epicenter!" – Asuka barked and a waypoint marker appeared on Kaworu's HUD. – "Everyone, double back and group up!"

'She is quite the commanding type, it would seem.'

'Not now!'
He knew immediately that simply doing a 180° would get him nowhere: although he'd go right through the Angels if he just charged straight into them, their claws wouldn't return the favor. While he already had several gashes in Unit-01's armor, the ones that went beyond the armor were relatively shallow and the cold numbed the pain for the most part. On the other hand, the feeling of an open wound exposed to massively subzero temperatures was anything but pleasant. In fact, Kaworu wondered as he grit his teeth whether he might've been better off just being cut open without the cold.

So, he veered off to the right and started to come about in a wide circle. And luckily for him, the Angels seemed to be too stupid to do anything other than blindly run after him. They didn't even try to cut him off and overtake him. He couldn't really see where he was going, but his destination and the other Evangelions' position were on his HUD, so he knew where to go.

Asuka got there before him, wildly gliding left and right to evade the Angels' charges like a matador but not firing back, evidently having realized it was a waste of ammo. Rei appeared in his sight a few moments later, holding her assault cannon across Unit-00's chest in an equally passive manner.

Kaworu spared a quick glance behind himself to make sure the two Angels on his tail were far enough away to give him room to think. – "Now what?!"

"Blue, hold fire! Nagisa, suppressive fire!"

"What?!!"

"Just fire your fucking gun!"

With that, Unit-02 fired a long burst flat in an arc loosely centered on the waypoint marker on his HUD, waving back and forth as if with a water hose. Deciding not to argue, Kaworu followed suit and opened up himself...

...and noticed the Angels in his sight all freezing mid-movement like marionettes for a moment.

Then a bullet ricocheted off a familiar octagonal wall of energy and Unit-00 immediately moved like lightning, taking aim and lobbing out a shell that exploded in mid-air and flared up the AT-field again.

"Target confirmed!" – Rei barked as the assault cannon's autoloader worked.

"Nagisa, get in there!" – Asuka howled as she focused her fire at the AT-field to keep it visible, soon to be followed by Unit-00's autocannons. – "GO! GO! GO!"

Kaworu, remembering the 'tactical meeting' they had in December that he was to take point, started sprinting at the disembodied AT-field at the same time as the six frozen Angels around them started flickering like a mirage. Yet he barely made a few strides before he heard it.

"Damnation, they're on to us!" – a male voice, sounding not more than someone in his twenties, swore.

"I'm dropping the camouflage, get ready!" – a female voice replied.

"Do it!"

He thought he saw something materialize but a split second later, a massive circular shockwave erupted in the exact spot he was headed to, hitting him with enough force to make Unit-01 stumble back and turning everything white. – "What the-?!"
"Smokescreen!" – Asuka barked. – "It kicked up the snow to obstruct line of sight! Eyes out!"

He waited, his eyes looking left and right, but there was no movement. Then, as the powdery snow settled down, he saw the Angel.

Or rather, Angels. There were two this time, looking exactly like the six they've been playing tag with up until now. Except as he squinted, he realized they weren't completely identical, with one having a very slight, almost golden sheen to it, while the other was more of a silvery color.

Then as if executing a synchronized dance, the Angels crossed their arms in front of themselves before going through what looked almost like a martial arts kata he once saw on TV, slashing the air with their clawed hands in a complex pattern before dropping into a fighting stance, several translucent AT-fields flaring into existence around each arm and rotating slowly in opposite directions.

'So this is why I could not recognize the presence.' Tabris mused. 'I though there was only one.'

'What do you mean? Which one is the real one?'

'Both are real.'

'There's two Angels?'

'Now that I know, I recognize them. Israfel and Sarafiel.'

For those not immediately familiar with the name, Kouji Takao is not an original character, but a member of the Wunder's crew in Rebuild 3.0, named only on the official character sheets but having a speaking role nonetheless and apparently being an acquaintance of Kaji.

While the Evangelion fanbase knows Israfel as the angel of music, Israfil (whose name means 'The Burning One' and is alternatively spelled as Esrafil) is actually an Islamic archangel whose praise of God sung in a thousand languages breathes life into hosts of angels. He is also the unnamed angel who blows the trumpet at the beginning of Armageddon. Sarafiel (not to be confused with Seraphiel, who's a Jewish angel) is an alternate name for the same angel and he is also associated to the Christian archangels Raphael and Uriel.
It was on that day that we realized just how badly outclassed we were. Well, more like found out the hard way. And as amusing as it might sound to the reader in light of certain subsequent events, it was on that very day when I felt the closest to fearing for my life - and for good reason. As bad as the thought of having to face two Angels at once sounded, it was nothing compared to what came afterwards. We had numerical superiority - but in the end, it didn't mean a thing against him.

Paradoxical as it sounds, having nightmares about that day would've been a blessing, not a curse. For the simple reason that if that would've been the most traumatic experience I went through, I wouldn't be the man I am today.

Western Siberia, Yenisei Estuary
1517 hours, local time

"This... could be a problem." – Kaworu murmured as he stared down the twin Angels. Now that he had a clear look, he noticed they weren't completely identical in terms of coloration; one seemed to have a very slight golden sheen to it. Whether it was Israfel or Sarafiel, he had no way of knowing.

The lull only lasted for a moment before Asuka opened fire on the Angel closer to her. Immediately the Angel moved like lightning, hand lashing out to project an AT-field that stopped the attack dead in its tracks; at the same time, the other Angel stepped behind the first's AT-field and its hands flew to the side before releasing a flurry of energy beams that immediately changed direction in right-angle turns to go around the AT-field and head straight towards Unit-02.

"Whoa!" – Asuka yelped and dived to the side, the shotgun-like barrage zipping through where she stood a second before to pulverize the snow behind her. Yet as soon as Kaworu and Rei opened fire themselves, the Angel stepped in front of the other and projected an AT-field from each hand, blocking the incoming fire from both attackers while the second Angel dropped its own field to do a sweeping motion with its arms that released a flat spread of energy beams, each beam immediately diving down and hugging the ground before heading outwards at knee-height.

"Jump!" – Rei barked and Kaworu decided better than to question it, clumsily jumping over the incoming barrage and immediately stumbling down to one knee upon landing. Try as he might, he simply didn't have the experience the girls seemed to have at controlling something that big, even with the added help of feeling its sense of balance.

Looking up, he saw both Angels making a simultaneous gesture akin to slamming the edge of their palms on a table and an identical pair of rings of light materializing behind them, Kaworu immediately recognizing it as the same phenomenon as what Shamshel did while flying. Yet instead of flying, the Angels shot forward, gliding over the ground at high speed, rhythmically weaving left and right crossing each other's path in a smooth sinusoidal pattern that was almost mesmerizing to watch.

"What now?!

"Group up!" – Asuka ordered. – "Don't chase them, they've got superior mobility and will surround and pick us apart one by one if we split up!"

Beginning to walk backwards towards the others, Unit-01 took aim and fired at the Angel which happened to be closer at the moment (as far as Kaworu could tell, what with their constant
movement). Not that it really mattered, since it wasn't like Kaworu's aim was good enough to hit a target not moving in a straight line - not to mention that the Angel just held up one hand and deflected the few bullets that actually met their mark without even slowing down. At the same time, the other Angel released another barrage but this time, it was aimed at him instead of at Unit-02.

Remembering Asuka's response earlier, Kaworu dived out of the way. Luckily, the beams didn't seem to be able to change direction this far away from the Angel, which was good for him. He looked up just in time to see the Angel extend some kind of energy blade from its palm that left a glowing trail behind itself as the Angel deftly dodged a close-range shot from Unit-00 and swiped at the Evangelion before it could reload...

...only for the Evangelion to let go of its cannon and bend so far backwards that its reactor thumped against the ground, the blade flashing past the chest armor so close as to cast a shadow on the ground below. Before the Angel could react, Unit-00 kicked off the ground into a brief handstand before flipping back onto its feet and immediately charging. The Angel immediately reversed the slash but Rei was faster, grabbing the Angel's elbow and yanking it behind her to make the Angel stumble forward before stepping behind it and twisting the arm so far backwards that if the Angel would've been human, it would've ended up with a dislocated and very likely broken shoulder joint.

Luckily for Sarafiel, she wasn't human.

Rei only realized her mistake of assuming human anatomy in her foe when said foe's hand turned a full 180° and let loose an energy blast in the blind that just barely missed Unit-00's head, shattering the right shoulder rack. Then the Angel spun around and hurled Unit-00 away so hard that the Evangelion literally flew nearly two hundred hundred meters before hitting ground in a massive eruption of snow.

"What were you trying to achieve with that?" – Sarafiel quipped with amusement, evidently having realized what happened.

Unit-00 was back on its feet in an instant, though Kaworu noted a slight stumble, as in pain. He immediately seized the opportunity and fired to cover her - or at least tried to, only for nothing to happen.

"Magazine depleted." – Adam informed him.

Quickly fumbling for the ejection option on his HUD and sending the empty box magazine on the bottom of his rifle plunging into the snow, Kaworu had Unit-01 reach up to its right shoulder rack, which opened and extended a spare magazine. It took him several tries to actually get it into the receptacle on the weapon itself, though, as the hole didn't have enough clearance for anything but an exact angle that wasn't easy with the level of manual dexterity he actually had with the Evangelion. A part of him noted that maybe he should tell Yui about it once back in Japan, but this wasn't the time to ponder on that.

He took aim but immediately held himself back. Rei was engaged in furiously agile melee combat with the Angel, dancing around its slashes while attempting to retaliate with her sole remaining progressive knife, but the Angel's reach was longer than hers. Though the Angel kept continually inching backwards, it wasn't due to being on the run: Sarafiel was deliberately maintaining just enough distance to stay out of knife range but still be able to strike back.

The Angel was clearly in control of the duel - and as Kaworu noted with rising alarm, Unit-00 actually seemed tired from the way its movement was slowly becoming duller and slower. Yet he knew that if he fired now, his poor aim would risk hitting Rei as well.
Then he realized with a sinking feeling that he completely forgot about the other Angel. And the third member of his own side.

Just one second before a voice shook him out of it. – "Hey, idiot! Are you gonna stand there doing fuck-all, or are you gonna help?"

Much to his surprise, Asuka didn't seem to need help at all, despite her lack of experience in an Evangelion. Unit-02 was engaged in a deadly dance with the other Angel, the two combatants exchanging fire at range instead of in melee. Yet despite the distance, there was no lack in speed in this particular duel either: Unit-02 made full use of its A-type equipment to weave around the incoming attacks even as the Angel matched pace with its own hovering, trying to maneuver around the Evangelion to find an angle where its attacks would catch its foe by surprise. But Asuka was anything but helpless: not only she kept the Angel in her sights while evading its energy beams, Kaworu realized she was actually trying to synchronize her return fire with the Angel's attacks to get through in the gaps between it dropping its AT-field raising it again.

Come to think of it, Kaworu realized, he hadn't actually seen any of the Angels attack through their own AT-field.

"MOVE IT!" – Asuka roared again as she abruptly reversed her heading and streaked in the opposite direction, causing Israfel's latest attack to hit only snow. Not that it gave the Angel any pause, as he immediately readjusted his aim even while evading her return fire.

His attention was only derailed by the bullets hitting his back, as Kaworu noted that even though Sarafiel was too close to Rei to be a target, that did not apply to Israfel who was safely far away from Asuka and was currently too focused on her to notice Unit-01 flanking him. The distraction lasted for only a moment before the Angel tracked the source and immediately threw up his AT-field in that direction with one hand without even looking, the other hand's palm continuing to fire on Unit-02. Yet being forced to multitask in three directions (his two foes and his own movement) at once took its toll, as the Angel's movement seemed to slow down.

A fact promptly proven when Unit-02's next burst exploded across Israfel's chest, eliciting a grunt of pain from the Angel as he stumbled and missed his own shot by a wide margin.

In the same instant, Sarafiel's head snapped towards Israfel. The Angel's entire body lit up with an unnatural glow, the air around her distorting with a mirage-like haze before air split and Sarafiel shot out towards Unit-01 like a giant, glowing cannonball, crossing the intervening distance in a split second and slamming into the Evangelion at full speed before Rei could open her mouth for a warning.

A gasp of pain tore itself out of Kaworu's mouth as the Evangelion tumbled end over end before resting on its back.

"Internal skeletal damage detected." – Adam reported.

And the pain indeed felt like it was coming from his ribs. – "Y-yeah... I detected that too..."

Then his world became one of pain once more as Sarafiel blasted Unit-01 in the chest. At the same time, Israfel turned his full attention back to Unit-02 and began closing the distance, evidently in an attempt to break the stalemate. Gritting his teeth, Kaworu clamped his finger down on the trigger of Unit-01’s chest autocannons. pushing the Evangelion up from the ground on its elbows just enough for the barrels to point at Sarafiel. It was blind fire, but it was enough to make the Angel raise her AT-field.
Which was enough time for him to grab Unit-01's dropped assault rifle and add it into the equation as well.

Spreading her arms wide, Sarafiel crouched down, the ring of light flaring back to life behind her back a moment before she blasted off directly upwards with enough force to shower him in debris, far faster than he could track with his eye or aim. Eyes darting up, Kaworu barely managed to catch the Angel's silhouette and throw Unit-01 out of the way before the Angel's feet plowed into the ground right where Unit-01 was, once again sending snow and soil flying. Yet Kaworu wasn't about to let her regain the advantage. Seeing his chance, he flopped back towards Sarafiel and grabbed her closer feet, yanking it hard enough to make the Angel stumble and pulling himself closer to her.

And as he saw Sarafiel aim her palm at him again, Kaworu heard what can best be described as a snarl over the radio, there was an orange flash – and the Angel was suddenly no longer standing above him.

Tumbling end over end from the force of its foe tackling her, Sarafiel managed to dislodge Unit-00 with a kick. Yet the Evangelion swiftly got back onto its feet and charged, Rei glaring at the Angel all but through her eyebrows, eyes promising nothing but murder. Sarafiel immediately moved to intercept Unit-00 with a horizontal slash, but the Evangelion ducked into a powerslide and plowed directly into the Angel's foot, hands immediately flying up to grab the front of her torso as she began to fall onto Unit-00 before the Eva practically kicked itself off the ground, lifted the Angel off her feet and violently slammed her into the ground.

Sarafiel immediately tried to take aim, only to hit nothing but air as Unit-00 grabbed her wrist and pushed it aside before yanking it upwards and burying its progressive knife hilt-deep into the arm. A howl of absolute rage tore itself out of Rei's throat as Unit-00 lifted a foot and forcefully stomped down on the Angel.

"YES!" – Sekhmet roared. – "SPILL THE BLOOD!"

Sarafiel's eyes instantly glanced towards Israfel, her face narrowly missing another stomp from Unit-00. The ring of light flashed up behind her as she tried to propel herself free, yet Unit-00 immediately grabbed a hold of her feet and pulled itself up, causing Sarafiel to tumble from the weight as Unit-00 scaled her body, not letting go despite both of them being dragged along the ground, and viciously slammed a fist into her face, again and again, not even bothering to use the progressive knife said fist was still gripping.

At the same time, a ring of light flared up above Israfel and the Angel attempted to rise with Unit-02 still on his back, only for Unit-01's armored boot to slam his upper body right back down. Yet as he took aim to supplement Unit-02's firepower with his own, Kaworu felt a wave of irritation that made him pause for a second. That was all the time Israfel needed: concentric octagons of energy appeared around his forearms and Asuka let out a surprised yelp as her Evangelion's shoulders were suddenly seized by two Israfel mirages that summarily threw her off of the actual Angel before vanishing into the thin air they materialized out of. Kaworu finally snapped out of his surprise and opened fire, but it
was too late: Israfel shot out like a rocket and plowed straight into Unit-01’s sole leg that was standing on the ground. This, coupled with the other leg resting the Evangelion's weight on the currently moving Angel's back, resulted in Unit-01 being quite literally flipped over as if it got the rug pulled out from under it, falling face-first into the snow.

Inside the entry plug, Kaworu let out a long sigh before beginning to get up. At least this time he knew for a fact that the frustration he felt was his own, seeing how he was beginning to get really tired of being tossed around like a ragdoll.

Veering sharply towards Sarafiel, Israfel's eyes flashed and an explosion erupted over Unit-00's back, weakening its grip just enough for Sarafiel to finally kick her off and get back into the air herself. The two Angels streaked towards each other and in perfect sync extended one arm each and gripped each other's hand, their momentum making them spin around in perfect symmetry as they fell back down, an ethereal glow building up in their free hands.

Then the Angels simultaneously slammed their glowing palms into the ground and a spherical shockwave erupted that kicked up not just snow, but even some of the dust underneath, obscuring the Evangelions’ sight.

"Group up!" – Asuka barked out. – "They might be trying to use a smokescreen to flank us!"

The three Evangelions immediately scrambled to their feet and stood back to back, each looking in a different direction. Kaworu glanced to his left at Unit-00, the radio still transmitting a ragged breathing.

Evidently Asuka heard it too. – "Cool it, Blue! They could be coming from any direction!"

"I know!" – Rei growled in a tone Kaworu had never, ever, heard the girl use before. She was furious to the point where she sounded ready to kill – and knowing how well she controlled herself under normal circumstances, he found that observation definitely worrisome.

His pondering was interrupted when he noticed a silhouette from the corner of his eye. Taking aim immediately, he nevertheless held back when he realized it wasn't the right shape. If anything, it looked more like...

The snow and dust settled to reveal an exact mirror image of Unit-01 pointing its assault rifle straight at him, Unit-00 and Unit-02 flanking it from the left and right, respectively.

Or rather, a lot of mirror images in an endless kaleidoscope.

"Now what?" – he muttered. Then he saw all of the Unit-02s simultaneously raise a hand and make the exact same gesture.

"It's a mirror." – Asuka reported.

"More like a lot of mirrors." – Kaworu replied before he had a thought. – "Rei!" – He opened Unit-01's right shoulder rack and tossed its progressive knife to Unit-00, who deftly caught it and acknowledged with a silent nod before giving it a brief twirl and returning to its vigil.

"I am not detecting any terrain obstruction in radar." – Lilith reported. – "This phenomenon appears to be limited to visual and infrared wavelengths only."

"Or it could be some kind of radar-dampening countermeasure." – Asuka said quietly. – "Eyes open. These guys are coordinating so well that they might as well be reading each other's mind."
"They are." Tabris answered, not that the girl showed any signs of having heard it.

Come to think of it, Kaworu realized he barely even heard the twin Angels talking during the battle. Not that the drone he fought last time was any more talkative, but at least he knew that one was a drone. These Angels, however, were not - and their silence aside from the grunts when they were injured was a mite unnerving.

"There is a pattern to their actions." – Rei pointed out, sounding slightly calmer. – "When one is attacked, the other immediately retaliates."

"I noticed that too." – Asuka replied. – "Every time we hurt one of them, the other dropped what it was doing and went after the offender. They're mutually covering each other."

"So?" – Kaworu asked.

"Forget about focusing on one at a time. We have to split them up and pin them both down at the same time, keep them from helping each other. And we've gotta do it fast; our ammo's not gonna last forever and they've got superior mobility, so they're gonna run rings around us once we're out."

Further discussion was cut off by Rei's bark of - "Incoming!" – as a ripple ran across the mirror wall as it was water and Sarafiel shot out of the center, directly at Kaworu.

He barely leaned out of the way of her blade in time, just before a lightning-fast grab by Unit-00 intercepted the Angel and yanked it right out of the air. Yet instead of being smashed into the ground again, Sarafiel's body twisted with impossible fluidity and dropkicked Unit-00's chest hard enough to make it let go, then immediately used the momentum to spin around and roundhouse-kick Unit-02 in the face before evading Unit-01's counterattack and zipping away flying backwards at lightning speed until it vanished into the mirrored surface, which once again rippled from her passing through.

"Fuck, that guy was fast!" – Asuka complained as soon as she recovered, the three Evangelions quickly getting back to her lookout position.

Another few tense seconds passed and Kaworu noticed a slight flicker in their mirror images just before Israfel burst through. The target this time was Asuka, who saw the Angel coming and unleashed everything she had against his AT-field before ducking to the side. And at the same moment, Rei stepped into his way and swiftly jammed both progressive knives into Israfel's front, his own momentum carrying him forward and cutting a pair of deep, bleeding gashes across the entire front of his body.

He didn't even stop for a counterattack but fled immediately, drawing a trail of blood across the snow before vanishing into the mirror.

"Excellent!" – Sekhmet approved.

"Are they going for hit and run attacks now?" – Kaworu asked.

"I don't know, but that's our cue to get moving!" – came Asuka's response. – "They'll keep hitting us again and again if we keep sitting here! Let's go!"

"Where?!"

"Out of here, idiot! I bet that mirror thing isn't solid or else they wouldn't be able to pass through it themselves!"

"And what if it's only solid when they're coming through?! You say those mirage things, they can do
"Then we'll grab the fucker that next comes at us and ram it halfway through the fucking wall if we have to! Use your brain for once!"

With that, Unit-02 broke into a sprint, the other two following close behind. Sarafiel was on them before they could reach the wall, launching a powerful blast into the ground ahead of Unit-02 in an attempt to force the Evangelion into stopping. Not that Unit-02 fell for it, returning fire while running to keep the Angel forced to shield itself but otherwise refusing to stop.

And indeed, the three Evangelions passed through the mirror wall without resistance – and as soon as they did, the entire phenomenon just blinked out of existence. One moment it was there, the next there was nothing but open terrain, without any transition. Off to the side, Israfel was faintly visible in the snowfall. As soon as the wall was gone, Sarafiel immediately veered away on her attack run and steaked back towards her ally, dropping to the ground and skidding to a halt right next to him.

Then both Angels materialized the octagonal rings around their forearms and in perfectly synchronized motion, snapped off a quick series of gestures before slamming their hands together. Kaworu thought he saw something black flash between them but in the next moment, everything but his HUD went completely dark.

"Shit!" – Asuka swore. – "I lost visual feed!"

"Mine's out too!" – he replied.

"As is mine." – Rei added.

"I'm not detecting anything wrong with my eyes." – Lilith reported. – "My external cameras have gone dark as well. Something's wrong outside."

Quite literally like a flare in the darkness, Kaworu saw four cones of light spear through the darkness as a quartet of powerful searchlights shone from Unit-00, two on the upper chest, two on the head. The snow they illuminated was of almost blinding contrast with the blackness above, but failed to piece the veil of dark. Both Unit-01 and Unit-02 turned on their own searchlights, the former doing so entirely on Adam's judgment while Kaworu mentally filed away the knowledge that his Evangelion even had searchlights, a fact he was formerly unaware of.

"Now what? Did these guys drop us underground or something?"

"I cannot tell." – Lilith replied. – "My terrain mapping radar indicates we are still in the same location. However, I am unable to detect anything beyond a six hundred meter radius. The threshold of the volume of space we are in appears to reflect all electromagnetic waves."

"So it's like a two-way mirror now?"

"It also reflects radio waves. Our radars are completely blinded by their own reflected signals. Lidar is likely to be affected as well."

"The cowards will be coming under the cover of darkness." – Sekhmet seethed.

"That... is a fair assessment, yes. It would appear these particular Angels are highly adept at manipulating electromagnetic radiation of all wavelengths, be it focusing, redirection, reflection or dispersal. Aside from their wide-area ranged attacks, it may also explain why our telemetry links went offline half an hour ago, shortly before our deployment."
"Which does not help us at all." – Asuka snapped. – "And we are not playing this game again. Same deal, everyone: huddle up and let's go."

"I don't think they're going to just let us walk out of here again." – Kaworu pointed out.

"Do you have a better idea?!"

"...no."

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*Geofront, AEL Headquarters*

*Same time*

"Contact is now passing over the Baikal region." – Hyuga reported.

"ETA?" – Shephard asked, wiping his forehead. He wasn't the type to usually sweat when agitated, but it would seem even his nerves had their limits. All contact with the Evangelions was lost when they arrived to the target area and their unknown contact was still closing on them without slowing down.

Closing in on his daughter.

"About ten minutes."

"And we still don't have eyes on it?"

"We're using the protocols the military gave us last month to borrow their satellites, but it's no good."

– Maya reported. – "It's moving so quickly that all the satellites in visual range can't provide anything clearer than this." – A blurry image appeared on the control center's main screen, little more than an orange blob with a bright blue trail.

'Like one of those foo fighter things.' Shephard mused, recalling an old documentary he once saw in his teens. Well, as much as a TV documentary talking about 20th century UFO sightings could be called a documentary, seeing how there was no evidence of extraterrestrial life at the time those documentaries were made. Or at least, no evidence anyone other than the fringe elements commonly referred to as 'conspiracy theory nutjobs' took seriously.

He sometimes wondered if any of them felt vindicated by Second Impact.

His thoughts were interrupted by Aoba's uncertain voice. – "Uh, sir...?"

"What is it?"

"The satellites just picked up a second contact. It's just within lunar orbit, but it's approaching Earth at a speed that... I mean, I'm not sure if it's instrument malfunction on those satellites. Whatever it is, its gravimetric signature is a match for an Angel, but the magnitude is way beyond the previous ones. It already fried the gravimetric sensors on several satellites and the speed..."

"I'm going to take a guess and say that it's going really damn fast." – Shephard deadpanned. – "Close enough?"

"Depends on how close nine million kilometers per hour is for you, sir."

A long silence settled on the command center before Yui quietly asked – "Mister Aoba, correct me if I'm wrong, but... is that not relativistic speed?"
"Yes, ma'am. Just above 0.8% of light speed."

"And in realspace too." – Hyuga murmured. – "The sheer energy required for that..."

"...is far more than what we've got." – Shephard finished, agitation making way to cold dread.

Kaworu involuntarily let out a yelp as an Angel's hand suddenly emerged from the darkness and backhanded Unit-01 in the face hard enough to make the Evangelion fall into a sitting position. The other two immediately turned around, but the Angel was already gone from searchlight range, without anyone ever having seen which Angel was it.

This wasn't the first strike the Angels have gotten in. There was simply no way for the three of them to see the attacks coming in the pitch black and the Angels abused that fact to no end, not only ambushing them over and over from different directions but doing so without using energy blasts, palm blades or anything that could gave away their position with light.

"How much more to go?!" – Asuka demanded.

"We're not going anywhere!" – Sekhmet growled.

"What do you mean?! The compass is still working, I know they hadn't turned us around!"

"Sekhmet is right." – Lilith interjected. - "The terrain beneath us is moving, but the edge of the area we can detect with terrain mapping radar is not approaching."

"How can-" – the girl paused at that same time as Kaworu made the same realization. – "Is this thing moving with us?!"

"It would seem so."

"For fuck's sake!" – Asuka raged, Kaworu hearing a thump he guessed was the sound of her slamming a fist into her entry plug seat. – "I'm starting to get really sick of this!"

"Has the size of the area our sensors are limited to changed?" – Rei asked.

"No. It is constant."

"Then there could be an upper limit to how large a volume they are able to enclose like this. I propose we head in different directions."

"No way!" – Asuka protested. – "We break up, they'll gang up on us one by one. I don't need to watch horror movies to know that you never split up the gang if the other guy has the upper hand."

"You and I are capable of fighting against them individually."

"And what about him?" – Unit-02 thumbed at Unit-01. – "Someone's gotta cover his ass."

"No, she's right." – Kaworu interjected. – "They can't just cut me up with their blades because if they do, the light will give them away and the rest of us can shoot them in the back."

"Which is small consolation if they already finished cutting you up by the time we notice and take aim, let alone actually hit them! Blue doesn't have her assault cannon, remember?"

"What do we do, then? If we stay together, we'll never get out of here."
Unit-02 swept its searchlights across the darkness to verify that no Angel was trying to creep up on them while they were talking before Asuka continued. – "There's one thing I want to try first."

"What?"

"Only one of them is coming at us at a time now. Same way as before. And they don't stay and fight, they just hit and run."

Which was a fact Kaworu was already aware of. – "Yeah, so?"

"Why aren't they attacking at the same time? You saw it too, we came out of the mirror thing, the other was just standing there, waiting."

"For its turn?"

"Maybe. But maybe they aren't attacking at the same time because they can't. They made this thing and the mirror one too, it didn't just spring up on its own."

"One is required to maintain it." – Rei surmised.

"Exactly." – Asuka nodded. – "And then there's that other thing. That pattern we saw."

"That they're covering each other?" – Kaworu asked.

"Yeah. I wonder if we catch the one that comes at us next and tear it a new one, will it bait the other into dropping this field? As long as only one is coming at us at a time, it's three-on-one, which works in our favor."

"But how are we going to see it coming in this dark?"

He heard Asuka make a frustrated groan. – "With sonar, idiot! Have you even read the manual of these things?!"

"There is no manual." – Rei replied instead of him. – "One is supposed to be eventually compiled based on testing data from Unit-02 as the final production prototype."

"Whatever! Lights off, sonar on, and stand still. Sekhmet, network with the others." – This time it was Asuka's turn to be on the receiving end of a frustrated groan. The AI clearly didn't have much patience for hunting such an elusive prey, but it wasn't as if she had much choice.

As the darkness engulfed the outside once more, Kaworu couldn't help but ask – "Why turn off the lights?"

"Because the light is giving away our position, that's why." – Asuka responded curtly. – "And before you ask, we were using them anyway because we can't see shit otherwise."

"You know they can probably see us anyway, right?"

"Could you possibly be any better at stating the obvious?!"

Kaworu just rolled his eyes and decided not to answer. He had a feeling that whatever he might say would just anger her even more. Which didn't sound like a good idea, though he honestly had doubts whether it was because of the imminent battle or just on general principle. Knowing her (as much as he could get to know her in just a few months, anyway), it could very well be the latter.

Whatever the case, he took a secure footing and tapped the holographic button that turned his
Evangelion's external lights off, his HUD automatically dimming along with the drop in external lighting. Not that it really helped much, as the darkness outside was absolute. Not even the darkest of nights he had seen measured up to it - and seeing that he lived his entire life (that he could remember) near major cities, light pollution made those nights nowhere near as dark as this.

On the other hand, the Angels were still nowhere to be seen and that fact was mildly unnerving. 'Why aren't they attacking?'

'They could be listening in on your plan.' Tabris supplied.

'How? Can they hear radio?'

'No. But they can hear you. And Lilim or not, the resonance of the light of the soul of a sentient lifeform transcends any language barrier. How do you think Shamshel could understand you, even through the Evangelion's flesh and armor?'

'But... how does that even work? I mean, I don't understand this 'Lilim' thing you talk about, but we have dozens of languages, if not more. Even we don't understand each other, how can an Angel that isn't even from Earth understand us?'

'That is a secret of the universe even Angels do not know. However, it does have its limitations. In our case, I do not believe Israfel or Sarafiel know what a sonar is, but do not count on them not being able to figure it out on their own. Harachel chose them as his pupils for a reason.'

Before Kaworu could ask for further clarification, the sonar display on his HUD pinged.

"Intermittent contact detected on approach." – Adam reported.

"That's our cue!" – Asuka called out. – "Stay sharp!"

The three Evangelions all turned towards the source of the movement. Yet barely a second after the signal noise from their own movement ceased, so did the Angel's movement. A few more seconds later, the blip reappeared but started moving to the side, rather than towards them.

"It is probing the perimeter." – Rei observed quietly.

"How?" – Asuka asked with a hint of surprise. – "We're using passive sonar, there's no outgoing ping for it to hear."

Then the signal stopped moving again... and Kaworu suddenly saw the Angel's glowing silhouette in the distance before the Angel suddenly closed the distance in a split second and slammed straight into Unit-02, knocking the Evangelion off its feet.

"Fuck! I forgot they can do that!" – Asuka cried.

Before the Angel could retreat, however, Unit-00 swiftly tackled it to the ground and the Evangelion's searchlights came back on to render the Angel visible to the others. Sarafiel once again attempted to drag herself and her unwanted passenger along the ground to free herself, but Unit-00's weight slowed her down just enough for a running Unit-01 to catch up and leap onto Unit-00's back.

Kaworu could plainly hear a strangled sound from the Angel beneath the two Evangelion's full weight. Having dropped his rifle so that it won't get in the way, he retrieved Unit-01's remaining progressive knife and sank it hilt-deep into Sarafiel's side while he heard Unit-00 doing the same on the other side and the Angel started trashing to try and dislodge them. Kaworu unconsciously flinched and almost dropped the knife when the Angel suddenly backhanded Unit-01's head hard.
enough to daze him for a moment from the feedback against his sense of balance.

And as he swung the knife for another stab, Unit-01's wrist was suddenly caught by an Angel mirage that materialized next to him, immediately yanking the entire arm upwards hard enough for him to feel like his shoulder was on fire before it swept down with its other hand and clawed straight through the armor, deep enough for the boy to distinctly feel the claws scraping against bone.

Kaworu didn't know whether he ever felt as much pain in his life as he did right now. Even gritting his teeth couldn't muffle the cry of pain that escaped his lips, which a part of his mind distantly noted seemed to set Rei off: Unit-00, for lack of a better word, went into a frenzy and started repeatedly driving its knife into the Angel like a crazed butcher as an enraged, wordless snarl came over the radio.

The next moment, Unit-02's foot met Sarafiel's face and the mirage flickered, Unit-01's hand phasing through its grasp and slipping free. Roughly jabbing the muzzle of its assault rifle into the immobilized Angel, Unit-02 pulled the trigger and for the first time throughout the battle, Sarafiel howled in pain as the high-caliber automatic fire tore into her flesh.

Then the entire world turned a blinding white as the darkness blanketing them disappeared and before Kaworu's entry plug display could compensate for the sudden change in brightness, Israfel's hand closed around Unit-01's throat and the sheer momentum of the Angel's approach tore the Evangelion clean off the top of the pile with such force that Kaworu thought he could feel something crack inside the Evangelion's neck. – "GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF HER, WRETCHES!" – Israfel roared in fury, his other hand swiping out and grabbing Unit-02 by the throat as well before slamming both Evangelions into the ground with his own weight, the sonic boom blowing over the group a split second later.

"You will die for that!" – the Angel raged, claws gripping Unit-02's neck tight enough to draw blood. Yet the Evangelion immediately returned the favor in the form of its head autocannons spitting lead directly into the Angel's face, disorienting him just enough for Unit-01 to free itself. Jumping to its feet, Unit-01 planted a foot into Israfel's shoulder and pulled its arm by the wrist with all of its strength. At the same time, Unit-02 tried to bring its rifle to bear but the weapon clicked empty, thus Asuka flipped it around and slammed its stock against the Angel's arm, to no effect. Then Israfel's grip slowly slackened as the Angel growled in pain, its twisted other arm beginning to give under Unit-01's strength.

Behind them, Sarafiel's limbs were flailing in ways anatomically impossible for a human, battering Unit-00 from every direction. Yet the Evangelion refused to go and instead, it sank its hands into the gaping wound on the Angel's side and ripped the exposed flesh wide open with its bare hands, spilling blood that caused the remaining snow underneath the combatants to steam and eliciting another howl of pain from Sarafiel.

As if on cue, Israfel's hand fully let go of Unit-02 and whipped upwards, energy flaring in the palm before the Angel slammed its hand into the ground, releasing a concussive blast that flung Unit-02 away like a ragdoll. Before Kaworu could react, Israfel's hand turned 180° and blasted Unit-01 in the chest hard enough to make it let go of the Angel's other arm, an opportunity Israfel immediately seized by launching itself at Unit-00 with acceleration that made the very ground behind it explode into a shower of frozen dirt.

Unit-00 barely had time to whip its head towards the incoming threat before Israfel grabbed the Evangelion's shoulders and, carried by his own momentum, flipped up into a handstand and over his foe upside down before planting his feet into the ground between Sarafiel's legs and uncoiling his body forward like a giant catapult, hurling Unit-00 away as if it didn't weigh anything. Then Israfel
spun around and grabbed Sarafiel before both Angels shimmered and blasted away into the blizzard, beyond visual range in the snowfall; Kaworu could see them coming to a stop about a kilometer away.

Rising from the ground, Unit-02 swiftly reloaded its rifle. – "Last mag!" – Asuka called out. – "You guys have any left?"

"I've got two." – Kaworu replied, pulling his own weapon out of the snow as he saw from the corner of his eye Rei breaking off from the group, probably to find hers. It was a good thing their weapons had radio transponders in them because as he looked across the torn-up terrain their battle left behind, he wasn't sure he'd be able to find anything he dropped without guidance. – "Want one?"

"Would appreciate it. Don't throw it, though; I don't think I'd be able to catch it with the dexterity I have in this thing yet."

"We are gaining the upper hand." – Rei remarked, still hidden beyond the snowfall.

"Don't jinx it, Blue." – Asuka warned. – "We've bloodied them, but they haven't bugged out yet."

"Probably catching their breath." – Kaworu guessed.

"Which is our cue to keep pressing. We've got the numbers and it's starting to show."

Handing over one of his spare magazines to Unit-02, Kaworu saw that Adam ran his rifle's self-test in the background, likely to check for snow damage. There was none, though and as Rei emerged from the blizzard with her assault cannon, the three battered Evangelions began marching towards their foe, weapons held at the ready.

Unlike when they arrived, the Angels were making no attempt to hide their position. Indeed, as they closed into visual range, both Angels were standing in the open, Sarafiel heavily leaning into Israfel in obvious pain. Octagons whirled around Israfel's free arm as if the Angel was preparing for something but the ones around Sarafiel's arm wavered and flickered before sputtering out completely. Yet Israfel pulled Sarafiel into what could only be described as a one-armed hug and both Angels visibly shuddered before Sarafiel's power surged and in perfectly identical motion and timing, the Angels drew a complex three-dimensional shape into the air around themselves before slamming their hands into the ground.

The next moment, Kaworu felt the world turning upside down. Every single orientation indicator on the entry plug's HUD went haywire as he felt Unit-01's feet lose the ground and start falling upwards, all snow in sight following suit and completely obscuring his sight just before he felt a powerful lurch followed by a twist so impossibly chaotic he momentarily felt sick to his stomach.

He finally felt Unit-01 slamming into the ground. Whether it was where he used to be, he couldn't tell.

And based on the groan coming over the radio, nor could Asuka. – "What... what the fuck was that?!"

As the snow began to settle, Kaworu looked up and saw that he was on some kind of landbridge. As he peeked over the edge, however...

...he saw a lot of landbridges crisscrossing in literally every angle. Including upside down. And sideways.

And he saw ground – sideways on the far left.
"What the hell...?"

"Mapping surroundings. Standby." – Adam spoke up. – "Mapping... Mapping... Mapping... Mapping... Mapping... Mapping... Mapping..."

He tried standing up but the Evangelion barely even responded. – "Adam, what's going on?"

"Mapping... Mapping... Mapping..." – the AI continued in a monotonous drawl.

"Adam!

"Mapping... Mapping... Mapping..."

Kaworu checked if he still had the radio channel open to the other Evangelions. Whatever was wrong, it thankfully didn't seem to affect communications. – "Guys, I think something is wrong with Adam. He's stuck or something."

"It appears the Angels somehow created a volume of non-Euclidean space." – Lilith replied with a tone of alarm. – "Adam attempted to map it onto a three-dimensional Euclidean projection but the mapping subroutine locked into an infinite recursive loop."

"I don't understand."

"The area we are now inside of is not three-dimensional. Adam's mapping subroutine is trying to interpret it as such and is endlessly going in circles due to self-contradicting results."

Kaworu opened his mouth but Asuka beat him to the punch. – "How is this shit even possible?!"

"I do not know. This level of spatial manipulation is far beyond even Combine technology."

"But aren't-"

"Is this really the time for this bellyaching?!” – Sekhmet snapped. – "We're in a battle! There's BLOOD to be spilled!"

"Quite right." – Lilith admitted. – "Nagisa-kun, do you still have access to the manual system controls?"

Kaworu wracked his mind for a second before poking a specific sequence of buttons on his right hand control, which caused a holographic window to appear in front of him. – "Yeah, I got it."

"Initiate a hard shutdown and reboot. As soon as you are back online, order Adam to disable his mapping subroutine and track us only with IFF transponders. Radar and gravimetric sensors are both inoperative, but visual and infrared still appear to work."

"We'll cover you." – Asuka added. – "Blue, eyes open!"

Forcing himself to remember where the relevant option was, Kaworu tapped the confirmation button and immediately flinched from a sharp spike of pain and disorientation in his head as the neural interface abruptly disengaged, the entry plug plunging into complete darkness with a dropping hum. Yet after a few seconds of silence, he heard a series of clicks and the hum returned, the panoramic display coming back to life with booting telemetry readout followed by the infinity-shaped DNA strand insignia of the AEL.
As soon as the external display activated, Kaworu barked out – "Adam, disable mapping subroutine, now!"

"Subroutine disabled." – the AI acknowledged.

Unit-01 rose back onto its feet just in time for the Angels to appear literally out of nowhere, floating in mid-air between the landbridges. Circling around them, the two unleashed the same barrage of energy beams as from the beginning of the battle, forcing the Evangelions to dive out of the way before returning fire. Yet even with Sarafiel visibly having difficulty staying in the air, she was still nimble enough to evade Unit-00's assault cannon and return fire with a blast that almost pushed her attacker off the edge.

Unit-02 briefly ceased fire to observe the flying debris... which, as soon as it fell below the bottom of the landbridge they were currently standing on, abruptly shot off to the side and under the bridge before once again changing direction and beginning to fall upwards, only to change direction again after a few hundred meters and fly parallel to the landbridge. – "Oh, that is not good!" – Asuka snapped.

"What?!" – Kaworu asked back, stumbling back from a near-miss hitting the spot where he stood a second ago.

"Whatever they did has seriously fucked up the gravity in here! We can't get in close like this and if we jump off, they're going to be juggling us like clay pigeons!" – She paused to get out of the way of another barrage. – "We gotta figure something out and do it fast because our ammo's not gonna last forever!"

"You've got A-type equipment, how about going after them?!"

"Have you been listening to a single word I was saying?! I can't fucking fly if I don't know which way is down!"

Kaworu opened his mouth to reply when he felt it. A rising pressure in his head, like the one he felt when the Ramiel appeared. Except it felt... different this time. And he had a hunch it wasn't due to Rei having done whatever she did to his brain to make sure he won't get incapacitated by it again. It felt... almost familiar and yet, it wasn't like the Ramiel.

Evidently the Angels felt it as well, stopping for a second. Then the pressure in his head spiked to painful levels a moment before the world around him shattered and all parts of his field of vision that contained the entry plug's outside view flared into a vibrating mess he could barely see through. This time the twisting of reality was so violent he actually hiccuped a mouthful of his stomach's contents before forcing it back down.

"I... I'm getting really fucking sick of this shit..." – Asuka groaned with a tone of irritation, unknowingly sharing his thoughts.

Kaworu shook his head, trying to blink away the vibration in his sight when Tabris spoke again.

'Wait... this presence...'

'What is it...?'

'NO.'

Whatever Kaworu would've said died in his throat at Tabris's tone.
A tone of pure, unrestrained fear.

'Damnation, this cannot...! What is he doing here?'

What? What is it?

As his vision finally begun to clear, he spotted the two Angels... on their hands and knees, barely even able to keep themselves from falling to the ground, evidently disoriented themselves from whatever happened.

And before them, standing in a crater Kaworu realized was surrounding all of them, a form straight out of a nightmare.

A thick, powerfully built body clad in dark carapace that looked more like something chiseled out of stone rather than grown, standing on a pair of almost reptilian feet, all three toes ending in massive talons. From around the main body, what looked almost like a mummy's wrappings unfurled into a pair of ribbon-like tentacles, revealing a face that looked almost like a distorted, toothless human skull, rather than the birdlike mask-skulls of the Angels he had seen so far.

Standing unsteadily on his feet, Israfel all but stumbled before the newly arrived Angel. – "Why did you come here?! We don't need your help!"

"Out of my way, whelp." – the Angel rumbled in a voice that chilled Kaworu. – "You had your fill."

"This is our battle! Do not-" – Israfel started to say but could not finish before one of the other Angel's ribbon-tentacles lashed out and coiled around his body tightly enough that even from this distance, Kaworu could distinctly hear bones snapping.

"I said..." – The ribbon-tentacle picked Israfel up with such ease as if he didn't weigh anything, swung him around in an almost casual manner...

...then snapped back so quickly that Kaworu saw it draw a blurred trail through the air and Israfel disappeared, his scream audible for only a tiny fraction of a split-second before the ribbon-tentacle released him with enough force to knock all three Evangelions off their feet from the air displacement alone. Literally enveloped in a trail of fire, Israfel crossed the distance between ground level and the bottom of the clouds above in barely a second – and the entire cloud layer blew apart into a several dozen kilometers wide circular hole, leaving clear blue sky marred only by Israfel's fiery trail that disappeared after a couple of seconds as the Angel violently left the lower atmosphere.

"...out of my way." – his assailant finished a moment before the sonic boom of Israfel's sudden suborbital departure blew over him and the stunned Evangelions.

With a snarl of pain, Sarafiel dragged herself off the ground and blasted off in Israfel's direction, soon enveloped by another trail of fire as the very air split before her. The other Angel only spared her a single glance before turning his attention back to the Evangelions.

Kaworu could do nothing but gulp as he both saw and felt him and the girls being sized up by the Angel in the same way a predator sizes up prey it wants to have fun with before the killing.

"My turn." – Zeruel rumbled.

This is the point in the story where the course and circumstances of the Angel battles begin to
seriously deviate from canon. I have been dreading writing this chapter for a very long time and for several reasons, not the least of which because this was among the last chapters I wrote for the original version of this story. Starting from about two chapters from now, I am working in completely original territory.

In the original version of this chapter, the twin Angels lacked all of their abilities in this version. Instead, they were accompanied by hundreds of roughly human-sized, three-legged creatures that swarmed the Evangelions with sheer numbers and proceeded to use their armored and beaked foreheads to literally headbutt the Evas' armor open (I'm not kidding, I used the creatures in Pitch Black as inspiration). For the rematch, Rei would've brought F-type equipment to deal with the small fry and the real Angels would've been killed by way of Unit-01 and Unit-02 tentacle-cannibalizing their S2 organs for no reason.

I don't think it needs to be stated which version of the battle I personally prefer.

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